

## SD 61.8

## Ālavaka Sutta

### The Ālavaka Discourse

Sn 1.10/31-33 = S 10.12/1:213-215

(Sutta,nipāta) Ālavaka Sutta Sn 1.10/181\*-192\*/31-33

(Sa,gāthā) Ālavaka Sutta S 10.12/846\*-857\*/1:213-215

Theme: A ferocious cannibal awakens to the teaching of the buddhas

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## 1 The Sutta, the yaksha and origin story

### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

#### 1.1.1 Texts and summaries of the Sutta

##### 1.1.1.1 SUTTA TEXTS

The **Āḷavaka Sutta** is preserved in 2 collections of the Pali canon, along with their respective Commentaries which closely parallel one another, as follows:

	<u>Verses</u>	<u>Pages</u>	<u>Commentaries</u>
• (Sutta Nipāta) Āḷavaka Sutta (Sn 1.10)	Sn 181*-192*	pp 31-33	SnA (1:)217-240.
• (Sagāthā) Āḷavaka Sutta (S 10.12)	S 846*-857*	S 1:213-216	SA 1:316-337.

##### 1.1.1.2 BRIEF SUMMARY

The **Āḷavaka Sutta**<sup>1</sup> is a highly dramatic yaksha-ballad with a pronounced poetic dialogue structure, centering on riddles—like those of the sphinx in Greek mythology—posed by a ferocious nature spirit or ogre [1.1.2.2]. The **Āḷavaka riddles** play a central role in the Sutta [2.1, 2.3.1].

The Sutta opens with the yaksha trying to humiliate the Buddha by making him go in and out of his abode thrice. When the Buddha refuses to comply on the 4<sup>th</sup> time, the yaksha threatens to harm the Buddha if he is unwilling or unable to answer some questions he has. The Buddha answers all the questions correctly, and the yaksha is converted. Now he respects the Buddha and says that he will wander about spreading the Dharma.

##### 1.1.1.3 SYNOPTICAL SUMMARY

The **Āḷavaka Sutta** is an ancient Buddhist story of a yaksha (man-eating ogre), Āḷavaka, who had been devouring the people of Āḷavī (an ancient city in north India), one person a day. When the Āḷavī king ran out of suitable people to sacrifice to the yaksha and was about to sacrifice his own young son, the Buddha intervened. The Buddha went to Āḷavaka's dwelling while he was away. When Āḷavaka learned of this, he at once returned, furious that the Buddha had made himself at home and was teaching his followers.

The Sutta itself opens with Āḷavaka trying to humiliate and anger the Buddha by making him go out of his abode, and then get in again, with which the Buddha calmly complied 3 times. The 4<sup>th</sup> time, the Buddha refuses to comply; the yaksha can do what he likes.

Āḷavaka then challenges the Buddha to answer a series of questions, threatening that if he fails then he will then make the Buddha insane, or grab him by the feet and hurl him across the Ganges. The Buddha answers all the yaksha's questions correctly. Āḷavaka is elated by the Buddha's answers and converts. [1.1.2.2]

The Sutta closes with Āḷavaka declaring that he will wander about and propagate the Buddha's teaching. The Commentary tells us that Āḷavaka also spares the young prince Hatthaka, and stops devouring humans.

**1.1.1.4** In this study, we will also look at the story of one of the most exemplary lay disciples of the Buddha, that is, the Āḷavī prince, **Hatthaka Āḷavaka**. We will learn how the Buddha, noticing the Āḷavī

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical analysis, see Jayawickrama *Univ of Ceylon Review* 8,1 1948:39-44.

prince is ready to attain the path, goes to Āḷavī for his sake, as well as for Āḷavaka and the people and beings who, by listening to the Dharma, will attain the path, too. [1.2.3, 2.2.4]

### **1.1.2 Sutta significance**

**1.1.2.1** We will here make a quick scholarly critical survey mostly with the help of N A Jayawickrama's close-study notes (1950) and K R Norman's philological analyses in *Group of Discourses* (2001).

According to **the Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary**, the events of the Āḷavaka Sutta occurred 16 years after the great awakening (*bodhi*) (BA 3,30-32).<sup>2</sup> **The Sutta,nipāta Commentary** says that the Buddha, in his daily attainment of great compassion (*mahā,karuṇa samāpatti*) at dawn, surveyed the world and saw that prince Āḷavaka (son of the Āḷavī king) was ready for the attainment of non-returning and that the yaksha Āḷavaka would attain streamwinning. And at the end of his teaching, some 84,000 beings would attain the Dharma-eye (*dhamma,cakkhu*) (that is, attain at least the first 2 paths). (SnA 1:220,1-6).

The same account in the Buddhavaṃsa Commentary says that 84,000 beings would attain awakening ("having taken the drink of the deathfree," *amata,pānam pāyetvā*, BA 3,31).

**1.1.2.2 The Āḷavaka Sutta**<sup>3</sup> is a highly dramatic yaksha-ballad, with a pronounced poetic dialogue structure, centering on riddles—like the sphinx of Greek mythology<sup>4</sup>—posed by a ferocious nature spirit or ogre who is eventually converted by the Buddha. It occurs in the Sutta,nipāta (**Sn 1.10/181\*/31-33**) and the Saṃyutta Nikāya (**S 10.12/1:213-215**), which suggests that it is very old. The Sutta,nipāta preserves 2 other yaksha-ballads: **the Hemavata Sutta** (Sn 1.9/153\*-180\*/27-31) and **the Sūciloma Sutta** (Sn 2.5/270\*-273\*/47-49), which are probably older than the Āḷavaka Sutta.

The Āḷavaka Sutta contains a series of questions and answers (§§9-18) followed by an epilogue in verse (§§19 f) whereas the Sūciloma Sutta ends with the Buddha's answer to the question at Sn 190. An examination of the Āḷavaka Sutta shows that §18 (Sn 190 = S 855) forms a suitable conclusion to the Sutta, with the line, *so'ham ajja pajānāmi yo attho samparāyiko* indicating the questioner's complete satisfaction with the answers he has received.<sup>5</sup>

**1.1.2.3** The tone of **the Āḷavaka Sutta epilogue** (§§19 f) appears totally different from that of the rest of the Sutta verses, and resembles that of some of the concluding verses of the Theragāthās or the later Apadānas. The only clear connection of the verses with the Āḷavaka-legend is in the phrase, *āḷavim agama*, "came to ... Āḷavī" (§19b). The fact that this Sutta is perhaps later than the other yaksha suttas is also suggested by the phrase, *yattha dinnam maha-p,phalam*, "where what is given bears great fruit" (§19d), a later *puñña*-based belief that stands at a much lower grade than the previous statement on understanding future good (§18cd).

It appears quite irrelevant that the yaksha should realize that the Buddha is an ideal "field of merit" (*puñña-k,khetta*), when he should be thankful for the Buddha's correct answers to his questions. The closing verse, **§20** (Sn. 192 = S 857), recurs at Ap 6,152, 415,17 and various Commentaries; and its tone is

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<sup>2</sup> For the events of the Buddha's first 20 years, see E J Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha*, London, 1927, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed 1949:119 & Jayawickrama, *Univ of Ceylon Review* 8,1 1950:40 n12.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical analysis, see Jayawickrama *Univ of Ceylon Review* 8,1 1948:39-44.

<sup>4</sup> In Greek mythology, a sphinx is a treacherous being with the head of a woman, the haunches of a lion, and the wings of a large bird. She challenges those who encounter her to answer a riddle, and kills and eats them when they fail to give the right answer. In the myth of Oedipus, only he manages to outwit the sphinx. See Martin Kallich, "Oedipus and the Sphinx," in (eds) Kallich, MacLeish & Schoenbohm, *Oedipus: Myth and Drama*, NY: Odyssey Press, 1968. See SD 60.1e (12.6.4).

<sup>5</sup> Jayawickrama 1950:40.

clearly late. It is highly probable that §18\* formed the original conclusion of the verses (*gāthā*) and that the epilogue was a later addition concurrent with the identification of these verses with the Āḷavaka story.<sup>6</sup>

**1.1.2.4** The name **Āḷavaka** means “of the forest,” derived from *aṭavi*, “a large forest,” often inhabited by tribal forest peoples (some of whom might have been savage), or by robbers (*cora*).<sup>7</sup> As a **yaksha**, Āḷavaka’s haunt was deep in the forest. In Indian mythology, the **yaksha** is a class of nature spirits,<sup>8</sup> that is, “non-humans” (*amanussa*), often serving as local guardians or tutelary spirits of the earth, of trees and of treasures hidden therein.<sup>9</sup>

The Sanskrit **yakṣa** (P *yakkha*) is an ancient generic name for “gods” from the highest (Creator-God) to the local tutelary tree-spirit.<sup>10</sup> The fact that they are mostly ignored by Vedic writers supports the possibility that they were pre-Vedic autochthonous spirits. Yaksha beliefs could also, in part, be based on the ancient urban Indian imagination of some savage forest tribes feared as cannibals.<sup>11</sup>

As a mythical being, the yaksha is found in the major Indian religions besides Buddhism, such as Jainism, and in rural religious beliefs.<sup>12</sup> In early Buddhism, the yakshas form the army of Vessavaṇa [Kuvera or Kubera], the great king protecting the northern quarters of the earthbound heavens (that is, Cātum,-mahārājika and Tāvatiṃsa).<sup>13</sup> Hence, we have 2 broad categories of yakshas: the servile spirits serving as protectors, and the individual fierce demons or ogres (like Āḷavaka).<sup>14</sup> While the former seem numerous, the latter are rarer.

In early Buddhism, Māra is referred to as the “great yaksha.”<sup>15</sup> In a few places in the early Buddhist texts and Commentaries, *yakkha* is used in a positive sense, such as in reference to Sakra, lord of Tāvatiṃsa heaven.<sup>16</sup> Even the Buddha is referred to as a “yaksha” in a positive sense, such as in **the Upāli Sutta** (M 56) and **the Satthāra,vandanā Sutta** (S 926\*).<sup>17</sup>

**1.1.2.5 The language** of the Āḷavaka Sutta<sup>18</sup> is standard poetic (*gāthā*) Pali. The Sutta is considerably old, and preserves many dialectical as well as old historical forms. The phrase ***mittāni ganthati***, “binds friends” (§§13c + 15d) preserves the historical gender of *mitta* (neutral), although in Pali the word is masculine (whose plural is *mittā*). The idiom itself is perhaps Vedic or post-Vedic rather than Classical Sanskrit or Pali.

<sup>6</sup> Jayawickrama 1950:40.

<sup>7</sup> J 6:55,14\*; Comy at A 1:178,21\*.

<sup>8</sup> On yaksha as nature spirit, see SD 54.2 (3.2.2; 3.2.3.4).

<sup>9</sup> See SD 21.3 (4.2.5); SD 51.11 (3.1.1.2); SD 54.2 (3.2.2.2) (4). See Punnadhammo, *The Buddhist Cosmos*, Neebing, ON, 2018: 3:4:2.

<sup>10</sup> It is prob in this connection, where yakshas are recipients of prayers and offerings, that we have the foll Pali etyms from the root VYAJ, “to sacrifice”: *yajanti tattha baliṃ upaharantī ti yakkhā*, “Therein, they are yakshas because (people) present them sacrifices and offerings (VvA 224,15 f); *pūjanīya,bhāvato yakkho ti vuccati*, “he is called a yaksha on account of being worthy of worship” (VvA 333,11 f).

<sup>11</sup> The 3 Vedas do not mention “yaksha,” but Atharvaveda 8.10,28 refers to yakshas as “other folks” (*itarajanaḥ*).

<sup>12</sup> See M & J Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, Routledge, 1977, 2019: Yakṣa(s); DPPN: yakkha.

<sup>13</sup> On the earth-bound heavens, see SD 54.3a (3.5.1).

<sup>14</sup> On terrestrial and celestial yakshas, see SD 21.3 (4.2.6).

<sup>15</sup> M 50,31/1:338 (SD 36.4) = Tha 1217; SD 51.11 (3.1.1.2).

<sup>16</sup> D 21,1.13/2:276 (Be); *sakko yakkho ti* (VvA 333,17); *yakkho’ham asmi kalyān* (J 4:106).

<sup>17</sup> M 56/1:386; S 11.19/926\*/1:235 (**So yakkho ti so sakko**, SA 1:353); also Sn 478, 875.

<sup>18</sup> For a philological study of the Sutta, see K R Norman, *The Group of Discourses*, PTS, 2001:23 f (tr), 202-205 (nn).

According to Jayawickrama, *sussusā* or *sussūsā* (§14c) is to be taken as a shorter instrumental singular (Vedic) and not as a contraction of the Pali *sussusāya*.<sup>19</sup>

There is a Vedic present participle in *saddahāno* (§14a) (cp Skt *śrad-dadhāna*).

There are dialectical forms such as *iṅgha*, “come now,” and *bhiyyo*, “better than” (§17ad).

The enclitic particle of interrogation *su* is frequently added to the interrogative pronouns to emphasise the question, as is characteristic of old gāthā-Pali (cp Epic *sma*).

Other old forms include: agent noun *uṭṭhātā*, “one with initiative” (§15b) and imperative 2<sup>nd</sup> singular, *pucchassu*, “ask” (§17a).<sup>20</sup>

**1.1.2.6** Other than having some familiar **doctrinal** terms such as *ogha* (“floods” of defilements), *aṇṇava* (“sea” of samsara), *appamāda* (heedfulness), *virīya* (effort or energy) and *paññā* (wisdom), the Āḷavaka Sutta shows a marked lack of metaphysical thought. The simplicity of ideas and the emphasis on **faith** (*saddhā*) highlight the Sutta’s antiquity and popularity.

The popular character of the Sutta is also seen from the occurrence of the word *idha* (“here,” in this teaching), such as *saddh’idha*, “faith is here ...” (§10a). The popular teachings by way of the 4 fundamental qualities of *sacca* (truth), *dhamma* (dharma) or *dama* (self-control), *dhiti* (steadfastness) or *khanti* (patience), and *cāga* (charity) (§§16 f)—the requisites of a diligent lay follower—are reminiscent of the brahminical Dharmaśāstras and other related branches of Sanskrit literature.

The practice of one’s *dharma*, *truthfulness*, *moral living*, *diligence*, *effort*, *wisdom*, *desire to learn*, *doing what is correct*, *steadfastness* and *patience* all prepare a person to enjoy the benefits of learning, fame, wealth, friendship and so on. These teachings were accepted by all schools alike (§17). The answer to the important question of teleological significance (§11) emphasises the role *saddhā* plays in popular Buddhism. As the contents show, this Sutta, dealing with popular teachings, appears old and seems to have drawn freely from ancient Indian lore.

**1.1.2.7** The Āḷavaka Sutta is included in the **paritta** collections of the Sri Lankan Maha Pirit Pota. Significantly, the 4 suttas preceding the Āḷavaka Sutta—the Parabhava (Sn 1.6), the Vasala (Sn 1.7), the Metta (Sn 1.8), and the Hemavata (Sn 1.9)—are all protective discourses (*paritta*). The parittas, as protective verses, appeal to the masses, comprising the massive lower strata of the Buddhist social pyramid. The Sutta reminds us of how the Buddha is able to overcome the most ferocious and powerful demon, more fearsome than even the serial killer Aṅgulimāla.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.2 THE YAKSHA MYTH

### 1.2.1 The Sutta,nipāta Commentary account

Here we will mention a bit of literary evidence on the yaksha-myth that may shed some light on the Āḷavaka Sutta and other yaksha suttas. **The Sutta,nipāta Commentary** connects the story of Āḷavaka with that of the friendly yakshas Sātāgira and Hemavata (SnA 220-222). When the two yakshas Sātāgira and Hemavata were on their way to Jetavana to pay their respects to the Buddha before leaving for a gathering of the yakshas, they found it impossible to fly over Āḷavaka’s abode. Upon investigating, they found the Buddha there. They went to him and saluted him, listened to the Dharma and then continued their flight to their destination.

<sup>19</sup> See Sn:N 204 n186.

<sup>20</sup> Jayawickrama 1950:41.

<sup>21</sup> **Aṅgulimāla S** (M 86), SD 5.11 (1.1).

### **1.2.2 The Udāna Commentary account**

A similar story is found at **the Udāna Commentary** (UA 63 f) about their passing over the abode of Ajakālāpa-yakkha.<sup>22</sup> This story reflects a popular attempt, however late it may be, to link the various yakshas with one another. The legend of Āḷavaka occurs in similar words in **the Saṃyutta Commentary** (SA 1:317-322), on the Āḷavaka Sutta in the Yakkha Saṃyutta.

### **1.2.3 The Aṅguttara Nikāya Commentary account**

A summary of the same myth occurs in **the Aṅguttara Nikāya Commentary** (AA 1:389-393) on Hatthaka Āḷavaka, the prince who is saved from the yaksha's hands. The story itself has much in common with the circle of stories grouped by K Watanabe<sup>23</sup> under the title *Kalmāṣapāda Stories*. The essential links are:

- (1) the man-eating yaksha,
- (2) the captured king who obtains his freedom by promising to provide the yaksha with food, and the sanctity of that promise, and
- (3) the conversion of the yaksha.

This similarity to the Kalmāṣapāda collection is sufficient proof of the antiquity of the Āḷavaka myth.<sup>24</sup>

## **1.3 ORIGIN STORY OF THE ĀḷAVAKA SUTTA**

### **1.3.1 The Āḷavī king goes hunting**

**1.3.1.1** The Commentaries on the Sutta,nipāta and the Saṃyutta Nikāya give the following origin story for the Āḷavaka Sutta.<sup>25</sup> The Sutta opens with saying that the Blessed One **was dwelling at Āḷavī, in the abode of the yaksha Āḷavaka**. It is said that both the country and the city (the capital) are called Āḷavī. Āḷavaka's abode was not far from the city, about a gāvuta<sup>26</sup> away.

Every seventh day, the king of Āḷavī, leaving off the enjoyment of his various dancers, would go on patrol with his army to expel bandits, repel hostile kings, and get some exercise, by going on a deer hunt. One day, he made a pact with his troops: "The one on whose side a deer flees is responsible for it."

A deer then fled on his own side. The fleet-footed king took a bow and pursued the deer on foot for three yojanas. Now, the black antelope (*eṇi,mīga*)<sup>27</sup> was fast for only 3 yojanas, so when it tired, it just stood as if it had entered the water. As it stood there, the king shot it and cut it in two. Though he had no need for the meat, in order to avoid any criticism that he was unable to catch any prey, he took it on a pole and set out to return. Not far from the city, he saw a large banyan tree with dense foliage, which he approached for his rest as he was tired.

<sup>22</sup> On Ajakālāpaka yakkha, see R Morris (Notes and Queries), *Journal of the PTS* 1886:92-99, esp 96-98. Jayawickrama spells it "Ajapālaka-yakkha" (1950:43).

<sup>23</sup> *Journal of the PTS* 6 1909:236-310.

<sup>24</sup> See DPPN sv Āḷavaka. Jayawickrama 1950:43; for "external evidence," see 43 f.

<sup>25</sup> SnA 2:217-222; SA 1:316-321.

<sup>26</sup> A gāvuta is a quarter yojana. A yojana is about 11.25 km (7 mi). As such, a gāvuta would be about 2.8 km.

<sup>27</sup> *Eṇi,mīga* is the blackbuck (Antelope cervicapra), or the "black antelope" (CPD, DP), SA 1:317,9 = SnA 217,2; J 3:325,10, 4:431,11 = *eneyya(ka)* (J 6:540,9 at 539,25\*).



**1.3.1.2** Now the yaksha Ālavaka had obtained a boon before “a great king” (*mahā,rāja*)<sup>28</sup> under that banyan tree. At noon, he dwelled there eating the beings that entered the tree’s shade. When the yaksha saw the king—who, seeing the yaksha, was paralyzed with fear, his thighs stiffened<sup>29</sup>—he approached to devour him.

But the king made a pact (*kaṭikā*) with him:

“Free me, and every day I’ll send you a human being and an oblation of food.”<sup>30</sup>

The yaksha answered: “When you are heedlessly indulging in your royal pleasures, you will forget. But I’m not allowed to eat anyone who has not entered my abode or who has not given consent.<sup>31</sup> So if I were to release you, how would I live?”<sup>32</sup>

Thus he did not release the king.

The king promised: “On the day that I did not send you anything, you can take me and eat me.”

Thus, he was set free and headed back towards the city. (SnA 216-218; SA 1:317)

### **1.3.2 The city-guard**

**1.3.2.1** Meanwhile, the troops had set up camp along the road. When they saw the king, they went forth to meet him, took his things, and said to him:

“Maharajah, why did you exhaust yourself merely out of fear of losing your reputation (*ayasa,matta,-bhayā*)?”

The king did not relate what had happened to them and returned to the city.

After his breakfast, he called for the city-guard (*nagara,guttika*) and informed him of the matter.

The city-guard asked:

“Did you limit the time, sire?” (*kiṃ deva kāla,paricchedo kato*)

“I didn’t.”

“You made a mistake, your majesty, for with evil spirits, it’s possible to limit the time. If there is no time limit, the country will face a calamity. But let it be, sire. Even though you did so, your majesty, be at ease and enjoy the bliss of kingship. I’ll do what needs to be done.”

**1.3.2.2** The city-guard got up early the next day, went to the prison, and said to those due to be executed:

“Whoever wants to live must leave.”

He led the one who came up first to his home, had him washed and fed, and then sent him off with the instruction:

“Take this pot of food as an offering to the yaksha.”

As soon as a person entered the area near the foot of the tree, the yaksha ate him as if he were radish.<sup>33</sup> It is said that on account of the yaksha’s might (*anubhāva*), the entire human body from the head-hairs down became like a lump of butter.

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<sup>28</sup> *Tasmiñ ca nigrodhe mahā,rāja,santikā varam* [SA *bhavanam*, 16] *labhitvā* (SnA 217,126-29). This, it seems, was a different “great king” from the subject of this story, perhaps his predecessor. It is unlikely that the yaksha received his abode (*bhavana*) from the king, since yakshas are capable of creating their own dwelling.

<sup>29</sup> *Yakkham disvā’s rañño bhayam chambhitattam ūru-t,thambham ahoṣi, tasmā rājā palāyiturū nāsakkhi* (SAṬ:Be 1:319,7-9).

<sup>30</sup> Be Ce Se *thālipākañ ca* (and an oblation of food), Ee *thālikañ ca* (and a pot of food). DP sv thāli: “*thālipāka*, a pot of food, a dish of food used as an oblation.” Subcomy adds that the king, in the hope of getting his freedom, first gave the yaksha half the deer that he had (SAṬ:Be 1:319,9 f).

<sup>31</sup> *Aham pana bhavanam anupagatañ ca ananuññatañ ca khāditum na labhāmi*. See foll.

<sup>32</sup> Ce *svāham bhavantam pi muccheyyam, katham jīveyyam*. Be Ee Se *svāham bhavantam pi jīveyyam*.

When the men who had brought him to deliver the yaksha’s meal saw this, they were terrified and reported the matter to their friends. From then on, people stopped committing crimes, aware that when the king arrested criminals, he gave them to the yaksha. Shortly thereafter, because no new criminals were found and the old ones were gone, the prisons were empty.

**1.3.2.3** The city-guard reported this to the king. The king then had his own wealth cast at the cross-roads, thinking:

“Perhaps someone may take this out of greed.”

But no one would even touch it with their foot. Since he did not obtain any criminals, he informed his ministers. The ministers said:

“Let’s send one old person from each family in turn. An old person is already close to death.”

But the king forbade it, saying:

“The people will resent us, thinking: ‘He sent our father, our grandfather.’ Don’t you think of doing this!”

“In that case, sire, let’s send an infant. For they don’t feel affection for such a child as they do for their mother or father.”

The king consented, and they did so. The mothers in the city took their children and fled; pregnant women also fled. They brought their children to other countries and nurtured them there.

(SnA 218 f; SA 1:317 f)

### **1.3.3 The Ālavī prince: Hatthaka Ālavaka**

**1.3.3.1** In this way, 12 years passed. Then one day, though the men searched the entire city, they could not find even a single child. They informed the king:

“Lord, there is no child in the city except your son, the Āḷavaka prince, in the palace.”

The king said:

“Just as a son is dear to me, so it is for all the world. But there is no one dearer than oneself. Go, give him, too, but protect my life!”

At that time, the prince’s mother had finished having her son washed and dressed. She prepared a soft pillow and put the boy to sleep on her lap. The king’s men went there on the king’s command, and while the nurse was chatting with the 16,000 consorts (*soḷasannañ ca devi,sahassānam*), they took the boy and left, thinking:

“Tomorrow the yaksha will have his meal.”

**1.3.3.2** That day, just before dawn, the Blessed One rose and entered the meditative attainment of great compassion (*mahā,karuṇā,samāpatti*) in the great fragrant cell in the great monastery in Jeta’s grove. [220] He again surveyed the world with the buddha-eye and saw that the prince of Ālavī had the supporting condition for attaining the fruit of non-returning; the yaksha the supporting condition for streamwinning; and 84,000 beings the supporting condition for gaining the Dharma-eye at the conclusion of the teaching.

When it became light, the Blessed One did his forenoon chores, and with the afternoon chores still undone—just as the sun set that day, on the uposatha of the dark fortnight—he took his bowl and robe,

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<sup>33</sup> Be Ce Se *mūla,kandaṃ* (SA 1:318,11 = SnA 218,24, Ee *khaṇḍa*). PED *mūla,kaṇḍa*, “edible tuber” (DhA 3:130,-1+4), *kanda,mūla*, “bulbs and roots” (D 1:101,13), a bulbous root (J 5:202). DP sv *kanda*, states that *kanda,mūla* is a radish (J 3:37,7).



and alone, without an attendant, walked along the footpath 30 yojanas from Sāvattihī. He then entered that yaksha's abode. Hence it is said: **in the abode of the yaksha Ālavaka.**<sup>34</sup>

But did the Blessed One dwell at the foot of the banyan tree where Ālavaka's abode was located or in the abode itself? It is said: "In the abode itself."<sup>35</sup>

For just as yakshas perceive their own abode, so do the buddhas. Having gone there, he stood at the entrance to the abode. (SnA 219 f; SA 1:318 f)

### **1.3.4 The Buddha spends a night in Ālavaka's abode**

**1.3.4.1** At that time, Ālavaka had gone to the Himalayas to attend a gathering of yakshas. Ālavaka's door-keeper, named Gadrabha, approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and asked:

"Bhante, has the Blessed One come at an improper time?"

"Yes, Gadrabha, I have come. If it's no trouble for you, I will spend a night at Ālavaka's abode."

"It's no trouble for me, bhante. But that yaksha is fearsome and harsh. He does not even pay homage to his mother and father. Do not think about staying here!"

"I know his fearsomeness, Gadrabha, but that won't be an obstacle for me. If it would not be any trouble for you, I will spend a night here."

**1.3.4.2** A second time the yaksha Gadrabha said to the Blessed One:

"Bhante, Ālavaka is like a fiery brazier (*aggi, tatta, kapāla, sadiso*).<sup>36</sup> He does not have regard for his mother and father, for ascetics and brahmins, or for the Dhamma. When others come here, he drives them insane or splits their hearts or grabs them by the feet and hurls them across the ocean or across the world sphere."

A second time the Blessed One said:

"I know, Gadrabha, but if it's no trouble for you, I will spend a night here."

"It's no trouble for me, bhante. But if I allow you without informing him, that yaksha may take my life. Let me inform him, bhante."

"Inform him as you please, Gadrabha."

"In that case, bhante, find out for yourself."

**1.3.4.3** Gadrabha then paid homage to the Blessed One and left for the Himalayas. The door to the abode opened for the Blessed One. The Blessed One entered and sat down on the couch of celestial gems where Ālavaka sat on auspicious days enjoying his splendour. The Blessed One then emanated a golden radiance.

The yaksha's women, having seen it, drew near, paid homage to the Blessed One, and sat surrounding him. The Blessed One gave them a miscellaneous Dhamma talk:

"In the past, you gave alms, undertook precepts, and made offerings, and thus you have achieved this fortune. Now you should do the same. Do not be overcome by envy or miserliness toward one another."

Having heard the Blessed One's sweet voice, they applauded him a thousand times and continued to sit there surrounding him. (SnA 220-222; SA 1:319 f)

<sup>34</sup> Be Se *gantvā tassa yakshassa bhavanam pāvisi. Tena vuttam ālavakassa yakshassa bhavane ti.*

<sup>35</sup> From hereon, cf UA 63 f & JPTS 1886:92-99 [1.2.2].

<sup>36</sup> All MSS read *aggi, tattaka, pāla*, "guardian of the fiery frying pan," "the guard who is like a fiery frying pan"! It is possible to read it as *aggi, tatta, kapalla* (preferred), where *tatta* (past part of *tapati*, "to burn or shine") means "heated, hot, glowing", and *kapalla*, "a pan (eg, frying pan or fire pan), often made of clay; a brazier," or even *aggi, tattaka, kapalla* (where *-ka + ka-* overlap), "a fiery frying pan or brazier." It seems to be a wordplay.

### **1.3.5 Āḷavaka is embarrassed**

**1.3.5.1** Meanwhile Gadrabha had gone to the Himalayas and informed Āḷavaka:

“You should know, dear sir, that the Blessed One is sitting in your mansion.”

Āḷavaka gave a signal to Gadrabha:

“Be quiet! I will go and do whatever is necessary.”

It is said that his masculine conceit (*purisa,māna*) caused him to feel embarrassed, and he therefore stopped Gadrabha, telling him: “Don’t let anyone in the assembly hear this.”

**1.3.5.2** Just then Sātāgira and Hemavata together with their retinues were traveling in the sky on different vehicles, thinking to pay homage to the Blessed One in Jeta’s Grove and then go to the yaksha gathering. The route for yakshas is not everywhere in the sky but only along certain defined tracks that avoid their mansions (*vimāna*) situated in the sky.

But **Āḷavaka’s mansion** was situated on the ground, well-guarded, surrounded by ramparts, with a well-constructed door, watchtower, and gate, and covered above by a bronze net, similar to a casket, and it was 3 yojanas in height; above it there was a path.

Having come to that region, they (Sātāgira and Hemavata) were unable to go further, for even up to the peak of existence, no one can travel above an area where the Buddha is sitting.

Wondering, “What’s the reason for this?” they saw the Blessed One.

Having descended from the sky as if they were clods of earth, they paid homage to the Blessed One, listened to the Dharma, circumambulated him, and told him:

“We are going to a yaksha gathering, Blessed One.”

Then, praising the 3 jewels, they left for the gathering.

**1.3.5.3** When Āḷavaka saw them, he stepped back and offered them seats. They informed Āḷavaka:

“How fortunate you are, Āḷavaka, that the Blessed One is dwelling in your abode. Go, friend, and attend upon the Blessed One.”

Thus, the Blessed One was dwelling in the abode itself, not at the foot of the banyan tree where Āḷavaka’s abode was located. Hence it is said:

**“On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Āḷavī, in the abode of the yaksha Āḷavaka.”**

(SnA 222 f; SA 1:320 f)

### **1.4 FROM CONFRONTATION TO CONVERSION**

The accounts from here to Āḷavaka’s conversion have been related in some detail elsewhere [SD 61a (2.5.2)], as follows:

#### **SD 61a:**

2.5.2.1 Other yakshas in the suttas (other than Sātāgira and Hemavata). Māra as a yaksha.

2.5.2.2 **The Āḷavaka Sutta**, a brief introduction.

2.5.2.3 At the yaksha gathering in the Himalayas, **Sātāgira and Hemavata** inform Āḷavaka of the Buddha’s presence in Āḷavaka’s abode. Āḷavaka reacts by a display of his great psychic powers. Sātāgira and Hemavata praise the Buddha which made Āḷavaka even more furious.

2.5.2.4 Āḷavaka directs **the 9 storms** upon the Buddha in Āḷavaka’s abode, and sends his horde of demons to attack the Buddha.

2.5.2.5 Āḷavaka uses **the cloth weapon** (one of the 4 most formidable weapons in Indian mythology). It causes drum-like thunder-claps in the sky, smoking and blazing. The Buddha turns it into a giant foot-wipe!

- 2.5.2.6 Ālavaka personally confronts the Buddha in the yaksha abode. Realizing that the Buddha is directing **lovingkindness** to him, neutralizing the effects of all his assaults, Ālavaka now resorts to humiliate the Buddha by trying to anger him. He makes the Buddha go in and out of his abode three times.
- 2.5.2.7 The Buddha complies to Ālavaka's instructions to soften Ālavaka's mind. However, the 4<sup>th</sup> time that Ālavaka tells him to get out of the abode, the Buddha refuses. Ālavaka can do what he likes to the Buddha.
- 2.5.2.8 Ālavaka now decides to ask the Buddha **the 8 questions** and threatens to make him insane or grab him by his feet and hurl him across the Ganges if he fails to answer them correctly.
- 2.5.2.9 Why Ālavaka is unable to drive the Buddha mad.
- 2.5.2.10 The Buddha makes "**the invitation of the all-knowing,**" that is, Ālavaka may ask the Buddha any question he wishes.
- 2.5.2.11 Comparing Ālavaka to Māra. How Ālavaka got the 8 questions.
- 2.5.2.12 Characteristics of "the Buddha's questions."

## 2 The conversion of Ālavaka the yaksha

The Sutta teachings and details are here explained along with commentarial notes (with references) and my own comments [within square brackets] or their own numbered sections.

### **2.1 ĀLAVAKA AND KASSAPA BUDDHA'S 8 QUESTIONS**

#### **2.1.1 The first 4 questions (nos. 1-4) and their answers [§§9 f]**

**2.1.1.1** These 8 questions were taught by **Kassapa Buddha** to Ālavaka's parents, who were attending on that Buddha. They in turn taught them to Ālavaka as a boy. As time passed, Ālavaka forgot the answers. To ensure he did not forget the questions, too, he inscribed them in vermilion on a golden scroll, which he kept in his mansion (*vimāna*). They were said to be "the Buddha's questions that are the Buddha's domain" (*buddha, pañhā buddha, visaya*). (SnA 1:228,22-27; SA 1:4-10)

After Ālavaka's parents died, he grew into a ferocious and powerful yaksha who devoured humans. He lost touch with the Dharma, that is, until he met another buddha, our Blessed One Gotama. The Buddha knows these questions, and that Ālavaka is ready for conversion to the path. Ālavaka asks the Buddha these questions, and the Buddha answers them just as they have been answered by Kassapa Buddha.

These "Buddha-domain questions" not only show that all buddhas teach the same Dharma, but they serve as a sort of wholesome karmic ground on which even an evil yaksha can stand. Further, in the presence of the Buddha, Ālavaka is reconnected with the Dharma—he becomes a streamwinner. The questions are listed here with the Buddha's answers. (SnA 1:228,22-229,1)

**(1) "What here is a person's best wealth?"** [§9a: Sn 182a = S 847a]

**2.1.1.2** The Commentaries say that **faith** (*saddhā*) [§10a] is here a person's best wealth. Such wealth as money and gold brings the happiness of use and enjoyment, dispels such suffering as hunger and thirst, alleviates poverty, is the means for obtaining such precious gems as pearls, and gains respect of the

world.<sup>37</sup> In similar ways, mundane and supramundane faith brings mundane and supramundane happiness respectively. Supramundane happiness ends the suffering of birth, decay, and so forth for those practising with faith as their vehicle; any lack of excellent qualities are alleviated and serves as the cause for obtaining the awakening-factors (*bojjhaṅga*).<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, one gains the respect of the world: A person of faith and moral virtue, possessing fame and wealth, is honored wherever he lives. (Dh 303)<sup>39</sup>

**2.1.1.3** Thus, faith is called “**wealth**” (*vitta*) [§10a]. This wealth that is faith follows one; it is unmatched by anything else; it is a cause for all excellence; and it is also a source of mundane wealth such as money and means.<sup>40</sup> For it is a person of faith who does meritorious deeds and acquires wealth, while one without faith wastes wealth for harmful purposes; hence, it is said to be the best (*seṭṭha*) (that is, used by the best of people for the best of things in a spiritual sense).

In a rare diversion, the Commentary seems to be apologetic. It says that the word *purisassa*, literally, “a man’s or that of a man” [§9a] is based on a teaching about what is categorically the “best” (for everyone) (*ukkaṭṭha,pariccheda,desanā*). Hence, it should be known that not all (of the benefactors of the best wealth) are men. For, the wealth that is faith is best for even women and others (*tasmā na kevalam purisassa, itthi,ādīnam pi saddhā,vittam eva seṭṭhan ti veditabbam*, SA 1:328,23-25).

## (2) “What well practised brings happiness?” [§92b: Sn 182b = S 847b]

**2.1.1.4 The Dharma** (*dhamma*) [§10b] here is the 10 courses of wholesome karma (*kusala kamma,-patha*),<sup>41</sup> summarized as charity (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*) and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*), the 3 bases for merits.<sup>42</sup> This brings human happiness, divine happiness, and in the end, the happiness that is nirvana.

The Commentaries simply glosses **well practised** (*suciṇṇo*) [§10b] as “well done, well conducted” (*suciṇṇo ti sukato sucarito*, SA 1:328,27). [This refers to disciplining one’s body and speech by moral training, cultivating the mind to be calm and clear, and developing insight into true reality (beginning with seeing impermanence).]

<sup>37</sup> SnA:Ee *loka,sannatim*. Variants: Ce *loka,santatim*, Be Se *loka,santhutim*; SA:Be Ce Ee Se *loka,santatim*. Sinhala Pali MSS sometimes confuse the letters  $\text{ṣ}$  *ta* and  $\text{ṣ}$  *na*, due to their similarity. The reading *sannati* is supported by SED: *saṃnati*, “subjection or submission to, humility toward,” and vb *saṃnamati*, “to bend down, to bow before or to.” Further, Dh 303 qu by the text, says that a faithful morally virtuous person, famous and wealthy, “is honored everywhere” (*tattha tatth’eva pūjito*) seems to confirm *loka,sannati* as the right or preferred reading.

<sup>38</sup> These are the 7 awakening factors (*satta bojjhaṅga*): (1) mindfulness, (2) investigation of states, (3) effort, (4) zest, (5) tranquillity, (6) concentration and (7) equanimity. See (**Bojjhaṅga**) **Sīla S** (S 46.3), SD 10.1.

<sup>39</sup> SnA 1:231,12-232,2; SA 1:328,6-25.

<sup>40</sup> SnA 2:231,25-29 = SA 1:328,7-11. Subcomy explains the 4 reasons for the faith being the best wealth: *Para,-lokaṃ gataṃ anugacchatī ti anugāmikaṃ. Aññehi na sādharmaṇaṃ ti anañña,sādhāraṇaṃ. Sabba,sampatti,hetū ti sabbāsaṃ sīla,sampad’ādīnaṃ lokiya,lokuttarānaṃ sampattīnaṃ hetu. Anattāya hoti anupāya,paṭipattito. Tasmā anugāmi,kattā anañña,sādhāraṇattā sabba,sampatti,hetu,bhāvato hiraññ’ādi,vitta,nidānattā ca saddhā,vittam eva seṭṭham*. (SAṬ:Be 1:321)

<sup>41</sup> The 10 wholesome courses of karma are the abstention from (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct; (4) falsehood, (5) malicious words, (6) harsh words, (7) frivolous words, (8) covetousness, (9) ill will and (10) wrong views. See **Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 136,11) SD 4.16.

<sup>42</sup> “Bases for merits,” *puñña,kiriya,vatthu*, ie, grounds for merit-making based on giving, moral virtue and mental cultivation: **Puñña,kiriya,vatthu S** (A 8.36/4:241-243), SD 22.17; D 3:218; It 51. They are often expanded into a set of 10 bases, ie, those based on (1) giving, (2) moral virtue, (3) mental cultivation, (4) reverence (humility), (5) service, (6) dedicating merit, (7) rejoicing in other’s merits, (8) listening to the Dharma, (9) teaching the Dharma, (10) straightening of view (DA 3:999; Abhs 5.24/146).

**2.1.1.5** The phrase, **brings happiness** (*sukhaṃ āvahati*) [§10b] means that one gains worldly well-being, such as that of Soṇa the treasurer's son, Raṭṭhapāla, and others; celestial happiness, such as that of Sakra and others; and in the end, the happiness that is nirvana, such as in the case of Mahāpaduma and others.<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that all happiness, worldly or celestial, are temporary and uncertain. Only when one has attained at least streamwinning will that happiness be lasting and steady.

**(3) “What is truly the sweetest of tastes?”** [§9c: Sn 182c = S 847c]

**2.1.1.6** By **truth** (*sacca*) [§10c] here is meant truthful speech, with nirvana as the ultimate truth (*paramattha, sacca*), which comprises truth as abstinence (from falsehood, *virati, sacca*). Of the various kinds of **tastes** (*rasa*) [§9c], truth is really the sweetest, truth *alone* is the sweetest (*sādutaraṃ*). Or it is the best (*sadhutaraṃ*), the supreme, the highest. This is because such tastes as that of roots, etc, nourish only the body and bring a defiled happiness, but the taste of truth nourishes the mind with calm and insight and brings an undefiled happiness. (SA 1:328,31-333,7 highlights)

This word “**truth**” (*sacca*) is found with many meanings, such as in the following statements:

- “one should speak the truth, one should not become angry” (Dh 224), it is truthful speech;
- “recluses and brahmins standing in truth” (J 5:491), it means abstinence;
- “why do they assert diverse truths, those proponents who claim to be skilled?” (Sn 885ab), it means views;
- “there are, bhikshus, these 4 brahmin truths” (A 2:176,26), it means brahminical truths;
- “truth indeed is one—there is no second” (S 884a), it means the supreme truth;
- “of the 4 truths, how many are wholesome” (Pm 2:108,34; Vbh §212/128), it means noble truths.

But here, **truthful speech** (*sacca, vācā*) is intended—including nirvana as *supreme truth* and truth as *abstinence*—through the spiritual might of which one exercises control over water and other things, and crosses beyond birth, old age, and death. Thus, it is said:

By the word of truth, one runs [stands firm] on water;<sup>44</sup> | by truth, the wise even destroy poison;  
by truth,<sup>45</sup> the sky thunders and rains; | firm in truth, they aspire for nirvana. [untraced]

Whatever tastes there are on earth, | truth is the sweetest of those tastes.  
Firm in truth, recluses and brahmins | cross over beyond birth and death. (J 5:491,6-9)  
(SnA 1:232 f)

**2.1.1.7 The sweetest of tastes** (*sādutaraṃ rasānaṃ*) [§10c]. The things called tastes (*rasa*) refer to a variety of experiences, as expressed in the following statements:

<sup>43</sup> On **Soṇa**, see V 1:179 f, A 6.55/3:374 f; on **Raṭṭhapāla**, see M 82/2:54 f. Comys say that **Mahā, paduma** was a king who was the son of the queen Padumavatī. He first enjoyed the happiness of kingship and later, having become a pratyeka-buddha, enjoyed the happiness that is nirvana (MA 4:127 f; SA 2:160, 188-191, 353 f; AA 1:173-175; SAT:Be 1:321; ThaA 3:128) [DPPN: Mahāpaduma (1)].

<sup>44</sup> The verse is not found in the suttas. Line a, SnA: Ee *sacca, vācena udakaṃ hi gādhati*; Ce *saccena vācen'udakaṃ hi gādhati*; Be *saccena vācen'udakaṃ pi dhāvati*; Se *saccena vācen'udakaṃ hi dhāvati*. Also in SA, where SAṬ explains, “One runs on the water-surface without dividing it, as if it were earth” (*udaka, piṭṭhiyaṃ abhijjamānāyaṃ paṭhaviyā viya dhāvati gacchati*) (SAṬ 1:282). VI “one stands firm (*gādhati*) on water.”

<sup>45</sup> In modern terms, this is “scientific truth.”

- “Taste of roots, taste of stems” (Dhs 180, §628), [and so forth, it is that which can be tasted];
- “I allow you, bhikkhus, the taste of all fruit juices” (V 1:246,17); [that which can be consumed];
- “Master Gotama is tasteless (*arasa,rūpa*)” (V 3:2,14 = A 4:173,16-26); [unsociable; a wallflower];
- “The recluse Gotama is tasteless (*arasa,rūpa*)” (V 3:2,16-18); [“not bent” on forms, etc; see following];
- “The taste of forms, the taste of sounds” (V 3:2,16); [enjoyment of the 6 sense-pleasures];
- “Any curry apart from bean curry (*rasa,rase*)” (VA 4:892); [Vinaya technical term];
- “This Dharma and Vinaya has a single taste, the taste of freedom” (A 4:203,7); [benefit, purpose, goal];
- “The Blessed One partakes of the taste of the meaning, the taste of the Dharma,” (Nm 104); [nuances, essence]; and so forth.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, of these tastes, truth is the sweetest or the most excellent, the best, supreme. For such tastes as those of roots nourish only the body and bring defiled pleasure; but the taste of truth—truth as abstinence and truthful speech—nourishes the mind with calm and insight, and brings undefiled pleasure. The taste of freedom is sweet because it is suffused with the taste of supreme truth; and the taste of the meaning and taste of the teaching are sweet because they occur in dependence on the meaning (*attha*) and the Dharma (*dhamma*) that are the means for attaining that (taste of freedom). (SA 1:232 f)

#### (4) “How lives the one whose life they say is best?” [§9d: Sn 182d = S 847d]

**2.1.1.8 (One) living by wisdom** (*paññā,jīvim jīvitam*) [§10d]: A householder lives by wisdom when he keeps an honourable occupation, goes for refuge (in the 3 jewels), gives alms, observes the precepts, fulfils the uposatha duties, and so on. One gone forth (as a monk or a nun) lives by wisdom when they undertake pure virtue and the superior practices beginning with purification of mind. (SA 1:330,8-16)

Living by wisdom, they say, is *the best life*. But here, among those who are *blind, one-eyed, and two-eyed*,<sup>47</sup> this is **the two-eyed householder** who lives by wisely undertaking the householder’s practice—pursuing a (wholesome) occupation, going for refuge, giving and sharing, undertaking the precepts, observing the uposatha, and so forth; and it is **the monastic** who wisely takes up the practice of a monastic—good conduct that brings freedom from remorse and the higher practices such as purification of mind and so forth. They say that the life of this one living by wisdom—or, among those who live, the one living by wisdom<sup>48</sup>—is best. This is the way that the meaning should be understood. (SnA 1:233)

**2.1.1.9 Living by wisdom** is to live wisely, to keep happily in touch with true reality. One wisely sees the body as the embodiment of *life, happiness* and *freedom* (valued by the first 3 precepts),<sup>49</sup> and speech as the wholesome communication with others (with *truth, pleasant, useful, unifying* and *timely*).<sup>50</sup> Thus one is “cultivated in body” (*bhāvita,kāya*),<sup>51</sup> which is the basis for mental training in calm and clarity for seeing into the true reality of impermanence. Thus, one is “mentally cultivated” (*bhāvita,citta*). This is the basis for overcoming defilements of *self-identity view, doubt* and *attachment to rituals and vows* that, in turn, leads one to the path of streamwinning. This is the beginning of *living by wisdom*.

<sup>46</sup> For encyclopedic defs of *rasa*, see Nm 240, Nc §540; Dhs 629.

<sup>47</sup> An allusion to A 3.29/1:128-130, where the “one with two eyes” is a householder who looks after both his temporal and spiritual welfare.

<sup>48</sup> *Paññā,jīvino jīvitam, tam vā paññā,jīvim jivatam*. The alternative glosses refer back to the two alternative readings of the line.

<sup>49</sup> On the 5 values underlying the precepts, see SD 1.5 (2.7+2.8); SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4); SD 54.2e (2.3.2.5).

<sup>50</sup> See **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,11.1), SD 38.1.

<sup>51</sup> On *bhāvita.kāya* and *bhāvita,citta*, see **Piṇḍola Bhāra,dvāja S** (S 35.127,7), SD 27.6a.



For the “one gone forth” or renunciant, it means keeping to the Vinaya in every way, practising meditation for calm and insight, with which to see the true nature of *impermanence* and *suffering*, and with growing wisdom, to better understand *nonself*. The purpose of this is to overcome the defilements that are the floods of views, existence, sensual desire and ignorance [2.1.2], and attain the path of nirvana in this life itself.<sup>52</sup>

### **2.1.2 The next 4 questions (nos. 5-8) and Ālavaka’s streamwinning [§11 f]**

#### **(5) “How does one cross the flood?” [§11a: Sn 183a = S 848a]**

**2.1.2.1** Having heard the Blessed One answer his 4 questions in this way, Ālavaka was satisfied and, asking the remaining 4 questions, he spoke the verse, “**How does one cross the flood?**”<sup>53</sup>

Then the Blessed One, answering him just as before, spoke this verse:

**“By faith one crosses the flood.”**

Here, one who crosses the fourfold floods [2.1.2.2-5] also crosses the vast sea of samsara, overcomes the suffering of the rounds (of rebirths), and cleans up the stains of defilements. Nevertheless, because one without faith, lacking faith, does not set out to cross the flood; and because one who is heedless, who sends his mind out among the 5 strands of sensual pleasure, becomes attached to them and stuck on them, and does not cross the vast sea of samsara; and because one who is lazy lives miserably, tainted by unwholesome qualities; and because one who is unwise, not knowing the path to purification, is not purified—therefore the Blessed One spoke this verse showing the opposite in each case.

(SnA 1:233,22-234,9)

**2.1.2.2** And in the verse stated thus, since the faculty of faith is the foundation for the path of streamwinning, by the line “**By faith one crosses the flood**” [§12a], he shows the crossing of **the flood of views** (*ditth’ogha*), that is, the path of streamwinning and the streamwinner.

Since the streamwinner possesses heedfulness, a designation for constancy of practice in the development of wholesome qualities, when he attains the 2<sup>nd</sup> path, he crosses the remainder of the vast sea of samsara—except for merely one more return to this world—represented by **the flood of existence** (*bhav’ogha*) [2.1.2.3], that has not been crossed by the streamwinner.

(SnA 1:234,9-12)

#### **(6) “How does one cross the sea?” [§11b: Sn 183b = S 848b]**

**2.1.2.3** Thus, by this line, “**By heedfulness, one crosses the sea**” [§12b], he shows the crossing of *the flood of existence*, the path of once-returning and the once-returner. This is because the once-returner attains the 3<sup>rd</sup> path by means of effort [energy], and thereby overcomes the suffering of sensual desire, that is, **the flood of sensual desire** (*kām’ogha*), not yet overcome by the path of the once-returner. (SnA 1:234,12-21)

<sup>52</sup> See (Anicca) Cakkhu S (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

<sup>53</sup> A Chin parallel, SĀ 1326, says that, after the Buddha has answered Ālavaka’s first 4 questions, the yaksha asks questions found in Hemavata S (S 1.9/153\*-180\*), viz, Sn 168, and the Buddha answers as in S 169. The yaksha then asks S 173, and the Buddha answers as in S 174 f. This exchange is recorded in a Chin parallel: T2.364c23-365a7. Finally, at 365a09, Ālavaka asks the questions found in Ālavaka S, Sn 183 [T2.365a12] and the Buddha answers [Sn 184]. Another Chin parallel, SĀ2 325 (T2.482c08 f), does not have this interpolation and is here closer to the Pāli.

**(7) “How does one overcome suffering?”** [§11c: Sn 183c = S 848c]

**2.1.2.4** [Once the once-returned has overcome sensual desires, he also overcomes its opposite, aversion; they go together.] By the line, “**By effort one overcomes suffering**” [§12c], he shows the crossing of *the flood of sensual desire*, the path of the non-returning and the non-returner.

[Basically, by uprooting sensual desire, the once-returned becomes a non-returner, that is, one who does not return to be reborn in the sense-world. If the non-returner does not die an arhat here in this world, he is reborn in the pure abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*),<sup>54</sup> where he resolves his karma and goes on to attain arhathood.] (SnA 1:234,21-26)

**(8) “How is one fully purified?”** [§11d: Sn 183d = S 848d]

**2.1.2.5** And since the non-returner attains the entirely purified wisdom of the 4<sup>th</sup> path by means of fully purified wisdom free from the mud of *sensual desire*, and thereby abandons the supreme stain not abandoned by the path of the non-returner, namely, ignorance, by the line, “**By wisdom one is fully purified**,” he shows the crossing of **the flood of ignorance** (*avijj’ogha*), the path of arhathood and the arhat.

At the conclusion of this verse, spoken with its culmination in arhathood, Āḷavaka was established in **the fruit of streamwinning**. (SnA 1:234,26-30)

**2.1.3 The 5 questions for ascertaining the goal (*attha,yutti pucchā*) [§§13-16]****(9) “How does one gain wisdom?”** [§13a: Sn 185a = S 850a]

**2.1.3.1** Now, having picked up the word “**wisdom**” (*paññā*) mentioned in the line “**By wisdom one is fully purified**,” asking a question that combines the mundane and the supramundane, Āḷavaka spoke this 6-line verse through his own acumen (*paṭibhāna*): “**How does one gain wisdom?**”

Here, all these questions begin with “**how**” (*katham su*), that is, they are about the means for gaining a benefit.<sup>55</sup> For having known *wisdom* and so forth to be the benefit, he asks about the means to attain it: **How**—by what means, through what cause—**does one gain wisdom?**

(SnA 1:234,32-235,5)

**2.1.3.2** Then, the Blessed One, showing how **wisdom** is gained through 4 causes, answered:

“**Keeping faith ...**” (*saddahāno*). [§14a]

This is the meaning: **Keeping faith** in the Dharma of the arhats for the attainment of nirvana one gains both mundane and supramundane wisdom. This is the Dharma through which arhats—buddhas, pratyeka-buddhas and disciples—have attained nirvana. The preliminary portion of this practice consists in bodily good conduct and so forth [2.1.1.8], and in the subsequent components of the 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi,pakkhiya dhamma*).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> SD 10.16 (13.1.6); SD 23.14 (Table 3).

<sup>55</sup> *Attha,yutti,pucchā*, which Subcomy glosses as “Questions connected with the means and method for the attaining of the goal that is wisdom and so forth” (*paññādi,atthasamādhigamassa yuttiyā kāraṇassa pucchā*, SAṬ:Be 1:325,8 f).

<sup>56</sup> The 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi,pakkhiya dhamma*) comprise the 7 sets, viz: 4 focuses of mindfulness, 4 right efforts, 4 bases of success, 5 spiritual faculties, 5 spiritual powers, 7 awakening factors [2.1.1.2], and the noble eightfold path: **Bodhi.pakkhiya,dhamma** (SD 10.1); SD 56.13a(2) (2.1).

However, this is not attained merely by faith. For since<sup>57</sup> “one who has given rise to faith (in the Dharma) visits a teacher; when he visits him, he serves him; when he serves him, he lends an ear; one who lends an ear hears the Dhamma”<sup>58</sup>—therefore, from the moment of visiting until one hears the Dharma, one gains **a desire to learn** [§14c]. What is meant here?

Having placed **faith in that Dharma**, one visits teachers and preceptors, whom one serves by doing their duties towards them. When they are satisfied with one’s service and wish to say something, because one has not lost one’s desire to learn, one lends an ear, and by listening, one gains wisdom.

Even when there is just **a desire to learn**, only one who is **heedful** [§14d], by constant presence of mindfulness, and **astute** [§14d], by being able to distinguish between what has been well said and what has been badly said, gains the well said, not the other. Hence, it is said: **One who’s heedful and astute** [§14d].

(SnA 1:235,6-23)

**2.1.3.3** Thus, it is through **faith** (*saddhā*) that one practises the way leading to wisdom; through **having a desire to learn** (*sussūsa*) that one carefully listens to the means for attaining wisdom; through being **heedful** (*appamatta*) that one does not forget what one has grasped; and through **being astute** (*vicak-khaṇa*) that one grasps it neither too little nor in excess, without distortion, and then expands upon it.

Or through **a desire to learn** one lends an ear and hears the Dharma that is the cause for gaining wisdom; having heard it through **heedfulness**, one keeps the Dharma in mind; through **astuteness**, one **examines** the meaning of the teachings one has kept in mind and then gradually **realizes** the supreme truth.

Therefore, when asked by Ālavaka, “**How does one gain wisdom?**” [§13a] the Blessed One spoke this verse, “Keeping faith ... astute” [§14], showing the 4 causes. (SnA 1:235,23-236,5)

#### (10) “How does one find wealth?” [§13b: Sn 185b = S 850b]

**2.1.3.4** Now, answering the other 3 questions, the Blessed One spoke this verse that begins with “**Doing what is proper.**”

Here, **doing what is proper** (*paṭirūpa, kāri*) [§15a] means: Without overlooking place, time, and other circumstances, one employs the proper means for gaining mundane or supramundane wealth.

**Dutiful** (*dhuravā*) [§15a]: By means of mental effort one does not neglect one’s duties.

**One with initiative** (*uṭṭhātā*) [§15b]: One possessing initiative by way of bodily effort, not relaxing one’s exertion, in the way stated thus: one “regards cold and heat no more than one does a blade of grass.”<sup>59</sup>

**Finds wealth** (*vindate dhanam*) [§15b]: One obtains mundane wealth like **the Little Apprentice**<sup>60</sup> who, with one mouse, soon earned 200,000 pieces of money; and one obtains supramundane wealth like the elder **Mahallaka Mahātissa**,<sup>61</sup> who made the vow: “I will dwell in 3 postures.” When dullness and drowsiness came upon him, he expelled them by wetting a coil of straw and putting it on his head and by entering water up to his throat. After 12 years, he attained arhathood. (SnA 1:236,6-19)

<sup>57</sup> Reading Be Se *yasmā pana*; Ce Ee *kiṃ pana*.

<sup>58</sup> These are the early stages of **the 12-stage discipleship**: **Caṅkī S** (M 95,20/2:173), SD 21.15; **Kiṭṭā, giri S** (M 70,23-24/1:480), SD 11.1. For the connection between “lending an ear” (*sotāvadhāna*) and “proximate means” (*upanisā*), see **Kathā, vatthu S** (A 3.67/1:198.27-30), SD 45.11.

<sup>59</sup> **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31,14.9/3:185,15 f), SD 4.1; Tha 232.

<sup>60</sup> The Little Apprentice (*cū’antevāsī*) is the protagonist of **Cullaka Setṭhi J** (J 4/1:120-122).

<sup>61</sup> Mahallakka Mahā Tissa is mentioned in SnA:Be Se, which agrees with SA:Be Ce Se. A certain Milakkhā Mahā Tissa is mentioned in SnA:Ce Ee; see DPPN sv. The 3 postures are sitting, walking, and standing. He did not lie down to sleep but rested or slept in the sitting posture.

**(11) “How does one win fame?”** [§13c: Sn 185c = S 850c]

**2.1.3.5 By truthfulness** [*saccena*]*—*by truthful speech as “one who speaks truth, who speaks fact,” and also by supreme truth—one wins **fame** (*kitti*) as “a buddha, a pratyeka-buddha, a noble disciple.”

(SnA 1:236,19-21)

[Note that the word for “fame,” *kitti*, refers to a supramundane state of attaining the path of awakening. It is just the opposite of the worldly states of “gains, honours and praises” (*lābha,sakkāra,-siloka*) that the Buddha often and strongly warns us (especially the renunciants) to avoid. The reason for this is clear and simple: gains, honours and praises arise from and feed **the self-identity view**.

With self-identity view, we identify with anything that gives us a (false) sense of permanence, certainty and plenty (that is, a self, craving and clinging)—in a word, *power*. For this reason, the Buddha warns us of the dangers in any desire for power by way of “**gain, honour, praise**” (*lābha,sakkāra,siloka*), as recorded in such teachings as **the Bhindi Sutta** (S 17.33): “Bhikshus, dreadful are gain, honour and praise, bitter, vile, an obstruction to attaining the unsurpassed security from the yoke.”<sup>62</sup>

**(12) “How does one bind friends?”** [§13d: Sn 185d = S 850d]

**2.1.3.6 By giving** (*dadam*) means by giving whatever wholesome they wish for and desire, one binds friends. Or one binds them by giving what is hard to give, or, under the heading of giving, the 4 means of attracting and sustaining a retinue are included.<sup>63</sup> What is meant is that one makes friends in these ways.

(SnA 1:236,21-25)

Giving, generosity or charity is the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 4 bases of welfare (*saṅgaha,vatthu*), which are: giving (*dāna*), pleasant speech (*peyya,vajja*), beneficial conduct (*attha,variya*) and impartiality (*samān’attatā*). These are the qualities that attract friends and bind good friendship; that is, the qualities of a good and true leader.<sup>64</sup>

**2.1.3.7** Once when the Buddha asks Hatthaka—fully, **Hatthaka Āḷavaka**—how he is able to command the allegiance of such a large following of 500, he answers, “By the 4 bases of welfare: by giving, by pleasant speech, by beneficent conduct, and by impartiality.”<sup>65</sup> The Buddha thus declares Hatthaka as the foremost amongst his lay disciples who draw and keep friends with the 4 bases of welfare (A 1.251/1:26). Hatthaka also has the virtue of fewness of wishes (*app’icchā*) and other qualities. In **the (Aṭṭhaka) Hatthaka Sutta 1** (A 8.23), the Buddha praises Hatthaka for having 8 remarkable qualities: *faith, moral virtue, moral shame, moral fear, great learning, charity, wisdom, and fewness of wishes* (A 8.24).<sup>66</sup>

Hatthaka is one of 7 laymen<sup>67</sup> who is always accompanied by 500 lay followers (A 4:218) who are all noble disciples of the path (*ariya,sāvaka upāsakā*) (AA 1:392). The Buddha praises his virtues in **the Hatthaka Sutta 1** (A 8.23), and in **the Eka,puttaka Sutta** (S 17.23), the Buddha holds up Hatthaka, along with

<sup>62</sup> **Bhindi S** (S 17.33), SD 46.24. This whole para is stock, recurring in all the 43 suttas of *Lābha,sakkāra Saṃyutta* (S 17/2:225-243). See also **(Opamma) Nāga S** (S 20.9/2:268-270), SD 69.12; SD 60.1d (7.6.2.3).

<sup>63</sup> Giving [generosity] is the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 4 conditions for welfare (*saṅgaha,vatthu*): giving (*dāna*), pleasant speech (*peyya,vajja*), beneficial conduct (*attha,variya*) and impartiality (*samān’attatā*): **(Tika) Āḷavaka S** (A 3.34), SD 4.8; **Saṅgaha Bala S** (A 9.5.6), SD 2.21; **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,1.16), SD 33.9.

<sup>64</sup> **(Tika) Āḷavaka S** (A 3.34), SD 4.8; **Saṅgaha Bala S** (A 9.5.6), SD 2.21; **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,1.16), SD 33.9.

<sup>65</sup> A 1.251/1:26,7-9. See **Spiritual friendship: A textual study**, SD 34.1 (6.2.1).

<sup>66</sup> **A 8.23/4:216-220; A 8.24/4:220.**

<sup>67</sup> The 7 laymen are Dhamma,dinna, Visākha, Ugga, Citta, Hatthaka Āḷavaka, Cūḷa Anātha,piṇḍika, Mahā Anātha,-piṇḍika (AA 3:291).

Citta the householder (*gaha, pati*) as models for male lay followers to emulate.<sup>68</sup> **The Buddha, vaṃsa** states that Citta and Hatthaka are the chief lay patrons (*agg'upaṭṭhākā*) of Gotama Buddha (B 26,19/98).

**(13) “When passing from this world to the next, how does one not sorrow?”** [§13d: Sn 185d = S 850d]

**2.1.3.8 (§16).** Thus, having answered 4 questions in a way that is common to householders and monastics and combines mundane and supramundane aspects, answering this 5<sup>th</sup> question, “When passing from this world to the next, how does one not sorrow?” the Blessed One spoke of these 4 qualities: “**The household life of one who’s a faithful seeker ... has these 4 qualities**” [truth, Dharma, steadfastness, generosity] [§16abc]. This is the meaning:

Faithful, because he possesses the faith that gives rise to all good qualities, as stated as follows:

“**Keeping faith in the Dharma of the arhats**”; seeker of the household life because he is a householder enjoying sensual pleasures who seeks a home or seeks the 5 strands of sensual pleasure.

(1) An aspect of truth was stated here: “**By truthfulness one wins fame**” (*saccena kittim opappoti*) [§15c].

(2) In the line “**One gains wisdom from a desire to learn**” (*sussusā labhate paññam*)<sup>69</sup> [§14c], **Dharma**<sup>70</sup> [§16c] was stated by the expression “**wisdom ... desiring to learn**”<sup>71</sup> [§14c].

(3) In the line, “dutiful, one with initiative,” **steadfastness** (*dhiti*) [§16c] was stated by the expressions “**doing what is proper, dutiful**” [§15a] and “**one with initiative**” [§15b].

(4) An aspect of generosity was stated here: “**by giving, one binds friends**” [§15d]. Thus, one in whom these 4 qualities exist does not sorrow when he dies: does not sorrow when he moves on from the present world to the next world. [SnA 1:236,26-237,9]

#### **2.1.4 Significance of Ālavaka’s 8 questions**

**2.1.4.1 The 8 questions** asked by Ālavaka are the highlights of the Ālavaka Sutta. They link Ālavaka back to the past (his good karma), and ripens as the present good karma of **the Ālavā prince** (Hatthaka), and the 84,000 beings who listen to the Buddha’s teaching at the end of the Sutta. Ālavaka inherited the questions from his parents who were attendants to the past buddha, Kassapa.

Having forgotten the answers, Ālavaka inscribed the questions on a gold sheet and kept them in his abode. It shows that he still valued them but had forgotten their real value. As a yaksha, he only knew the way of ferocious violence. He tried to get the answers to those questions by asking his victims. Unable to answer, they all perished by going mad or were flung across the Ganges.

<sup>68</sup> S 17.23/2:235 f.

<sup>69</sup> **§14c** [Sn 186c = S 851c]: Sn:Ce Ee S:Ce Ee *sussūsā labhate paññam*; Sn:Be Se S:Be Se *sussūsam labhate paññam*. The former is found in the sutta in Sinhalese and PTS editions, the latter in Burmese, Siamese and all 4 SnA editions. Comy treats *sussūsā* as a truncated instrumental of *sussūsāya*, but Jayawickrama disagrees: it “is to be taken as a shorter inst sg (Vedic) and not as a contraction of the Pāli *sussūsāya*” (UCR 8,1 1950:41 = PBR 2,3 1977: 146 §57). *Sussūsam* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phrase is nominative with *paññam* as accusative: “The desire to learn [listen] begets wisdom.” Or, *sussūsam* functions as the first component with *paññam* in a split compound meaning “the wisdom consisting in a desire to learn.” SnA, in fact, uses the cpds *sussūsā,paññā* and *sussūsana,paññā*, which supports this interpretation. Bodhi sees a gloss in SnA employing an explicit instr, *sussūsāya sakkaccam paññā’dhigamūpāyam suṇāti*, “through a desire to learn, one carefully listens to the method for achieving wisdom.” He thinks that this suggests that SnA takes *sussūsā* as a truncated instr, which is “the definitive reading” (Sn:B 626).

<sup>70</sup> Despite the reading *damo* in SA:Be 1, the gloss in Subcomy supports *dhamma*: Tattha “ime kusalā, ime akusalā ti ādinā te atthe yāthāvato dhāraṇato upadhāraṇato dhammo (SAṬ:Be 1:327). [2.2.1.3]

<sup>71</sup> Here the two terms are respectively *sussūsam labhate paññam* and *sussūsana,paññam*.

**2.1.4.2** Āḷavaka himself does *not* know the answers to the 8 questions. Yet, he is able to know the right answers when he hears them. It is the Buddha who answers them rightly, but it is not because it is *the Buddha* who answers them, but rather Āḷavaka at once recognizes they are the right answers. In an important way, the answers are there deep within his being, like something we know right “at the tip of our tongue.”

Hence, we can say that Āḷavaka has **the right questions**. So long as he does not know the answer, he is trapped in his old ferocious evil self. The Buddha is the one who gives him all the right answers, but it is Āḷavaka himself who knows them to be right. He is transformed by this self-realization and gains streamwinning. The point thus remains: the right questions invite the right answers.

**2.1.4.3** The last point to note is how the 8 questions unify the teachings of all the buddhas. We are told that the questions and their answers were taught by the immediate past buddha, Kassapa, to Āḷavaka’s parents who taught them to Āḷavaka. Despite being a ferocious evil yaksha, Āḷavaka preserves the link between the past buddha and our present buddha.

The link is established by our Buddha giving the same answers as those given by the past buddha, Kassapa. Yet, this is not merely a matter of knowing the right questions and their right answers—the answers being given in a timely manner and understanding the answers is liberating: it frees us from ignorance and suffering. It gives us insight into true reality and to the path of awakening. It made Āḷavaka a streamwinner.

## 2.2 ĀḷAVAKA THE STREAMWINNER

### 2.2.1 Qualities of a true lay follower [§17]

**2.2.1.1 §17.** Thus, the Blessed One, having answered the 5<sup>th</sup> question, exhorting the yaksha, said: “**Come now.**” Here, “come now” (*iñgha*) is an indeclinable in the sense of exhorting.

**Others, too:** other teachings, too.

**Ask ... the many recluses and brahmins:** or ask the many other recluses and brahmins who claim to be omniscient, such as Pūraṇa, whether there exists a **better** method for winning fame **than truth**,<sup>72</sup> in the way stated by us here, “**by truthfulness one wins fame**” [§15c]; or whether there is a better means for gaining mundane and supramundane wisdom **than self-control**, stated here by the section of wisdom desiring to learn:<sup>73</sup>

“**One gains wisdom from a desire to learn**”<sup>74</sup> [§14c]; or whether there is a better means for binding friends **than generosity**, in the way stated here: “**by giving, one binds friends**” [§15c]; or whether there is a better method for finding mundane and world-transcending wealth **than patience**, a designation for enthusiastic energy in enduring the great burden. It is spoken of as “dutifulness” and “initiative” undertaken for the sake of this or that benefit, as stated here: “**dutiful, one with initiative**” [§15ab]. [Ask them] **whether**, when passing on from this world to the next world, there exists here any better means for not sorrowing than these 4 qualities stated thus: “truth, Dharma, steadfastness, generosity.”

We will now briefly examine how these 4 qualities are related.

**2.2.1.2 The 4 qualities**—*truth, Dharma, steadfastness, generosity*—mentioned at **§§16 f** refer back to **§§14 f. Truth** (*sacca*) occurs in all 3 places in 2 Suttas: Sn 187c = S 852c, Sn 188c = S 853c, Sn189c = S

<sup>72</sup> So Be Se *saccā bhiiyyo kitti-p,patti,kāraṇaṃ vā*; Ce Ee *saccā bhiiyyo kitti-p,patti,kāraṇaṃ saccam*. The final word seems redundant. SAṬ:Ce 256 f (Ce) agrees with SnA:Be on this).

<sup>73</sup> SA:Be *sussūsā ti paññā,padesena*; SA:Ce *sussūsana paññā,padesena*; SA:Ee *sussūsana,paññā,padena*.

<sup>74</sup> All 4 eds of SnA + SA:Be *sussūsam labhate paññam*; SA:Ce *sussūsā labhate paññam*.



854c.<sup>75</sup> **Charity** (*cāga*) [§16c + 17c] clearly corresponds to **giving** (*dadaṃ*) in §15c. As to the equivalence of **wisdom** (*paññā*) [§14c] and **Dharma** [§16c], the Commentary explains that **Dhamma** [§14c] is spoken under the name of wisdom gained through a desire to learn, on which the Subcommentary comments (on the parallel, S 1.12/1:214 f): “Wisdom is called *dhmma* because of bearing up and examining dhar-mas (states) in accordance with reality.”<sup>76</sup>

The overlapping of *dama* with *dhamma* may suggest a corrupt reading, but we see these readings in almost all versions of the Suttas: *dhammo* in §16c and *damā* in §17c. The Subcommentary explains that wisdom is self-control “because it controls the defilements, or controls body, speech, and so forth.”<sup>77</sup> **Steadfastness** (*dhiti*) [§16c] is indicated by the terms “**dutiful**” and “**one with initiative**” (*dhuravā utṭhā-tā*) [§15c], and are the same as **patience** (*khanti*) [§17d].

## 2.2.2 Connecting the Sutta teachings [§§16 f]

### 2.2.2.1 In its paraphrase of §17 (Sn 189 = S 854), Comy states:

“Come now, ask the many recluses and brahmins whether there is any greater means for winning fame than truthfulness; any greater means for gaining mundane and supramundane wisdom than self-control;<sup>78</sup> any greater means for binding friends than generosity; and any greater means for finding mundane and supramundane wealth than patience, which is identical with active effort (called patience) in the sense that it endures heavy burdens, and which is referred to by the names dutifulness and initiative.” (SnA 1:237,10-29)

Thus, the correlations can be shown schematically as follows:

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| (1) §15c: truthfulness             | = §§16c + 17c: truth.                   |
| (2) §14c: wisdom                   | = §16c: Dharma = §17d: self-control.    |
| (3) §15d: giving                   | = §§16c + 17c: generosity.              |
| (4) §15ab: dutifulness, initiative | = §16c: steadfastness = §17d: patience. |

This completes the explanation of the 8 questions that the yaksha had learnt from his parents. When the Buddha finished teaching, bringing his verse to a climax in arhathood, the yaksha was established in **the fruit of streamwinning**. [§12d]

**2.2.2.2** This is a commentary on the meaning together with a brief presentation [of the teachings]. For details, it should be understood by “analyzing each individual term according to the methods of commenting on the term by extraction of meanings and extraction of terms” (*ekam ekam padaṃ atth’uddhāra, pad’uddhāra, pada, vaṇṇanā, nayehi vibhajitvā*, SnA 1:237,27-29).

The Subcommentary expands on this as follows:

“**Each term** (*ekam ekam padaṃ*): each term such as ‘wisdom’ and so forth.

**Extraction of the meaning** (*atth’uddhāro*) is, for example, extracting the meaning ‘wisdom’ thus: ‘*Paññā* is called “wisdom” in this place and “dhamma” in that.’

<sup>75</sup> These are §§15c, 16c, 17c respectively.

<sup>76</sup> *Ime kusalā, ime akusalā ti ādinā te atthe yāthā, vato dhāraṇato upadhāraṇato dhammo, paññā* (Ce 1:287, corrected).

<sup>77</sup> *Kilese, kāya, vācādi ke vā dameti ti damo, paññā* (SAṬ:Be 1:327, also Ce Se).

<sup>78</sup> The reading *dama* foll Subcomy, which explains that wisdom is so called because it tames (*dameti*) the defilements as well as body and speech, etc. [2.2.1.3]

**Extraction of terms** (*pad'uddhāro*) is extracting synonymous terms, for example: 'wisdom, understanding,' and so forth.

**Commenting on the terms** (*pada,vaṇṇanā*) is discussion of the term, for instance, 'Paññā is what understands, *dhamma* is what sustains, *dama* is what tames.'" (SAṬ:Be 1:327)<sup>79</sup>

### 2.2.3 Āḷavaka rejoices in the Dharma [§§18-20]

**2.2.3.1** When the Buddha finished speaking, the yaksha had resolved whatever doubt that might have driven him to ask more questions. Thus, Āḷavaka declared:

**Why now need I ask the many recluses and brahmins?** [§18ab].

Informing those who do not know his reason for not asking them, he said:

"Today I have understood the good pertaining to future lives." [§18cd]

Here, **today** means "starting today."

**I have understood**—I have known in the aforesaid way—the **good** (*attho*): By this much he shows the good pertaining to the present life, stated in this way: "One gains wisdom consisting in a desire to learn."<sup>80</sup>

**Pertaining to future lives** (*samparāyiko*): By this he refers to "these 4 qualities" [2.2.1.3] that, when one dies, cause absence of sorrow in future lives.<sup>81</sup>

And **good** (*attha*) is a designation for a cause. For this word **attha** occurs in the following usages:

- the meaning of a passage, "with *attha* and with phrasing" (D 1:62,31);
- purpose,<sup>82</sup> "I have an *attha*, householder, with money and gold" (D 2:176,17);
- progress, "There is *attha* for those of good conduct" (J 1:144,19);
- wealth, "many people associate for the sake of *attha*" (Pv 4.1.4; PvA 219);
- benefit [welfare], "one practises for the *attha* of both" (S 1:162,31);
- cause, "when an *attha* has arisen, [they desire] a wise man" (J 1:387,4).

But here it occurs in the sense of cause. Therefore, the meaning here should be briefly understood thus: "Today I have understood for myself, in the way explained by the Blessed One, the present-life cause for obtaining wisdom and other benefits, and the future-lives cause for not sorrowing after one dies. So why now should I ask the many recluses and brahmins?" (SnA 1:237,30-238,20)

**2.2.3.2** Thus, having said, "I have understood the good pertaining to future lives," the yaksha next says, "Indeed, it was for my sake that the Buddha came to stay at Āḷavā," showing that his knowledge is rooted in the Blessed One. Here, **for my sake** (*atthāya*): for my (spiritual) welfare or for my (path) progress.

**I have understood where what is given bears great fruit:** "I have understood that the Buddha is the foremost of those worthy of offerings; he is the one to whom what is given with the generosity stated among 'these 4 qualities' bears great fruit." But some say that he said this with reference to the sangha.

<sup>79</sup> This is a Porāṇa Tīkā (Ancient Subcommentary); hence, sometimes, abbreviated as SAPṬ.

<sup>80</sup> Here all 4 eds of SnA read *sussūsam labhate paññam*, but Ce has *sussūsā labhate paññam* (SnA:Ce 1:257,18 f), as does Comy gloss on *damo* in **Nidhi,kaṇḍa S** (Khp 8,5): KhpA:Be 188 KhpA:Ee 221,13 and KhpA:Se.

<sup>81</sup> According to Bodhi, although Comy explains *attha* as the visible benefit (*ditṭha,dharmikam dasseti*) and *sam-parāyika* as the benefit in future lives, it seems the 2 words should be understood simply as an adj and a noun bearing a single significance, viz, the good pertaining to future lives. (Sn:B 1421 n832.

<sup>82</sup> Ee Se *vicakkhane*, Be *kiccatthe*, Ce *payojane*. SA:Be 1:292 has *vicakkhane*, but SA:Ee 1:334,25 *ācikkhane*. Ee notes other variants. SAṬ:Ce 1:287 glosses *vicakkhane* with *sapayojanatāya*, "with purpose."

[Thus, we may understand this as referring to the Buddha, while he lives, and the noble sangha, even after the Buddha's passing.]

Thus, having shown with this verse the achievement of his own welfare, now, showing his practice for the welfare of others, he says:

**“Now I will travel about.”** The meaning of this should be understood in the way stated in relation to **the Hemavata Sutta** (Sn 1.9/180\*). (SnA 1:238,20-28)

**2.2.3.3** From the SnA Commentary on **the Hemavata Sutta** (Sn 1.9/180\*):

**From village to village:** from celestial village to celestial village.<sup>83</sup>

**From mountain to mountain:** from celestial mountain to celestial mountain.

**We will wander ... paying homage to the awakened one and to the excellence of the Dharma:**

“We will wander paying homage, with the voice of Dharma extolling over and over the excellence of the Buddha's awakening and the excellent nature of the Dharma thus:

‘The Blessed One is indeed perfectly awakened; the Dhamma is indeed well taught by the Blessed One,’ and so forth, and also extolling the good practice of the sangha thus:

‘The Blessed One's community of disciples is indeed practising well.’” (SnA 1:216,22-31)

## **2.2.4 Hatthaka Ālavaka, “of the hands”**

The Commentaries continue with the background story.

**2.2.4.1** Just as Ālavaka finished speaking this verse, dawn was breaking (*ratti,vibhāyanam*): there was the sound of sadhu and applause,<sup>84</sup> and the bringing of the Ālavaka prince to the yaksha's abode all occurred simultaneously. The king's men, having heard the sound of applause, wondered:

“Such applause does not resound for anyone other than the buddhas. Could it be that the Blessed One has come?”

They then saw the Blessed One's bodily aura. Unlike in the past, they did not stand outside but entered (the yaksha's dwelling) without fear and saw the Blessed One sitting in the yaksha's abode with the yaksha standing there reverently saluting him.

Having seen this, they said to the yaksha:

“Great yaksha, this is the prince, brought to you as an offering. Come now, eat him or do with him as you wish.” (SnA 1:239,1-12; SA 1:336)

**2.2.4.2** Since the yaksha was now a streamwinner he felt **ashamed**,<sup>85</sup> especially as this was being said in the presence of the Blessed One. Then, he took the prince with both hands and presented him to the Blessed One, saying:

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<sup>83</sup> Hemavata, like Ālavaka, are yakshas (*yakkha*), ie, nature spirits. Hence, they have the ability to move around in the lowest sense-world heavens, viz, the heavens of the 4 great kings (*cātum,mahā,rājika*), and perhaps, Tāvātimsa (Sakra's heaven), too.

<sup>84</sup> Subcomy: “Of the deities who had assembled to hear the Dharma” (*dharmassavan'attham sannipatita,devatā-hi*, SAṬ:Be 1:328,24; SAṬ:Ce 1:287). This was at the break of dawn when the king's people arrived with the prince as offering to Ālavaka.

<sup>85</sup> This means that he is endowed with moral shame (*hiri*) and moral fear (*ottappa*): **Hiri Ottappa S** or **Cariya S** (A 2.1.9), SD 2.5c; **Moral shame and moral fear**, SD 2.5.

“Bhante, this prince was brought here for me, but I give him to the Blessed One. The buddhas are compassionate, so let the Blessed One accept this boy for his welfare and happiness.”

Then he recited this verse:

*imam kumaram sata,puñña,lakkhanam  
sabb'ang'upetam paripuñña,vyañjanam  
udagga,citto sumano dadāmi ca  
paṭiggaha loka,hitāya cakkhumā*

This prince [boy] has a hundred marks of merit,<sup>86</sup>  
his limbs are complete, his features are full.  
Elated in mind and joyful, I give him to you:  
let the one with the eyes accept him for the world's  
welfare.

The Blessed One accepted the prince. While accepting him, as a blessing for the yaksha and the prince, he spoke a verse with one line missing. The yaksha then filled in the 4<sup>th</sup> line three times, causing the prince to go for refuge, as follows:

*digh'āyuko hotu ayam kumāro  
tuvāñ ca yakkha sukhitto bhavāhi  
avyādhitā loka,hitāya tiṭṭhatha  
ayam kumāro saraṇam upeti buddham  
ayam kumāro saraṇam upeti dhammam  
ayam kumāro saraṇam upeti saṅgham*

May this prince be long-lived,  
and you, O yaksha, be happy.  
Dwell without affliction for the welfare of the world.  
This prince goes for refuge to the Buddha;  
this prince goes for refuge to the Dharma;  
this prince goes for refuge to the Sangha.”

(SnA 1:239,12-31)

**2.2.4.3** The Blessed One then returned the prince to the king's men, instructing them:

“Bring him up and then give him to me again.”

In this way, the prince passed from the hands of the king's men into the yaksha's hands (*hatthato ... hattham*), and from the yaksha's hands into the Blessed One's hands, and from the Blessed One's hands again into the hands of the king's men. For this reason, he came to be called “**Hatthaka Āḷavaka**”<sup>87</sup>— “Āḷavaka of the Hands.”

When the farmers, woodsmen, and others saw that the king's men had returned with the boy, they were frightened and asked:

“Could it be that the yaksha did not want the prince because he is too young?”

The king's men replied,

“Do not be afraid. The Blessed One has ensured our safety,”

and they told them everything.

Then the entire city of Āḷavā was in an uproar, exclaiming in the direction of the yaksha:

“Excellent, excellent!”

When the time for the Blessed One to walk for alms arrived, the yaksha took his bowl and robe, accompanied him halfway, and then returned. (SnA 1:239,31-240,8)

**2.2.4.4** When the Blessed One had wandered for alms in the city and completed his meal, he sat down on the excellent buddha-seat that he prepared for himself at the foot of a secluded tree by the city gate. Thereupon the king and citizens, together with a multitude of people, gathered and approached the Blessed One. Having paid homage to him, they sat down around him and asked:

“Bhante, how did you tame such a terrible yaksha?”

The Blessed One then related to them **the Āḷavaka Sutta**, beginning with the battle:

<sup>86</sup> *Sata,puñña,lakkhanam*. Subcomy: “Because he had accumulated merits through 100,000 eons, by way of those merits he had a hundred marks of merit, marks produced by his many merits.” (SAṬ:Be 1:328,26 f; SAPT:Ce 1:288)

<sup>87</sup> So Be Se. Ce Ee *hattha,āḷavaka*.

“He sent these 9 kinds of storms against me. He created such and such frightful apparitions. He asked me such and such questions, and I answered him in such a way.”

At the conclusion of the talk, 84,000 people made the breakthrough into the Dharma (*dhammābhisamaya*). [They attained various stages of the path, especially streamwinning.]

Thereupon the king and the citizens made an abode for the yaksha near the abode of the great king Vessavaṇa and initiated a perennial offering accompanied by such tributes as flowers and incense. And when the prince reached maturity [when he was about 16], they sent him to the Blessed One, telling him:

“You owe your life to the Blessed One. Go attend upon the Blessed One and the sangha of monks.”

As he was attending on the Blessed One and the sangha of monks, in no long time he was established in the fruit of a non-returner. He learned the entire Buddha Word and acquired a retinue of 500 lay followers. The Blessed One named him one of the foremost disciples: “This, bhikshu, is the foremost among my male lay disciples who draw and keep a retinue with the 4 bases of welfare, namely, Hatthaka of Āḷavī” (A 1:26,9). [2.1.3.7] (SnA 1:240,8-31)

## 2.3 HUMOUR IN THE ĀḶAVAKA ACCOUNTS

### 2.3.1 ĀḶavaka and the ĀḶavī kings

**2.3.1.1** The highlights of the **ĀḶavaka story** are cannibalism, human sacrifices, superhuman powers, demonic pride and spiritual mystery. Even a tiny incongruence or discrepancy will pierce the darkness that enshrouds the story of ĀḶavaka before his conversion like glow-worms in a dark night. If there were such incongruences or discrepancies we would have enough light to see some redeeming quality in ĀḶavaka and the story as a whole. To see the lesson or beauty behind mythical or religious stories, we need to see such disparity in their proper perspective. One way to read this disparity is to see them as the basis for **humour**. First there is this stark or embarrassing departure from goodness or true reality; then the situation turns out all right. We tend to smile, even laugh, with relief at such developments.<sup>88</sup>

**2.3.1.2** We are not told whether all yakshas were cannibals. We know, however, that the yakshas Sātāgira and Hemavata were devout followers of the Buddha, and there is no hint at all that they were cannibals. But ĀḶavaka’s cannibalism is central to his story and **the ĀḶavaka Sutta**. We are told that “the yaksha ĀḶavaka had obtained a boon before a great king at that banyan tree” [1.3.1.2]. Clearly, this could not be the current ĀḶavī king that ĀḶavaka threatened to devour. We must thus conclude that it was some previous king whose life was spared by ĀḶavaka.

That “great king,” the story goes, probably permitted the yaksha to eat any being, including humans, who had the misfortune to venture into the banyan’s shade. That king must have also agreed not to divulge this pact; for then, no one would dare go into that area of the forest.

The present king of ĀḶavī, too, made a pact with the yaksha, that is, to provide him with a human a day for his meal. The yaksha then admitted a curious fact: “I’m not allowed to eat anyone who has not entered my abode or who has not given consent.” [1.3.1.2]. This means that the yaksha was willing to keep his promise or he was under some constraint not to break any pacts or promises he had made. In other words, the yaksha’s powers were in some ways limited.

**2.3.1.3** Back in the safety of his palace, the king confided only in his **city-guard** (*nagara, guttika*), probably the head of the city’s constabulary (like a modern police force). The city-guard seemed to chide

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<sup>88</sup> For a study on humour in early Buddhism, see **The Buddha’s humour** (SD 98.1).

the king for “making a mistake” in not setting a “time-limit” to the pact, “for with evil spirits, it’s possible to limit the time” [1.3.2.1].

Perhaps, if the city-guard knew such secrets about “evil spirits,” he would also have known how to destroy or control them. But then, we would not have any more story. The city-guard knew his duties and he was ready to carry them out, and told the king to do what he was meant to: “Your majesty, be at ease and enjoy the bliss of kingship. I’ll do what needs to be done.” [1.3.2.1]

**2.3.1.4** One way of reading the Alavaka story is as a parallel to our own—the presence of a yaksha cannibal sets the conditions for life in the kingdom as a brute fact. One, it seems, cannot opt out of cannibalism; one can only accommodate it. Ursula K Le Guin, in *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (1973),<sup>89</sup> says the same thing about capitalism (built around colonialism and neocolonialism, class exploitation, gender inequality and so on). It seems to allow the argument that it is possible to walk away but the real imperative is to change the situation.

There would have been severe consequences with either choice. However, if we worked to change things, we would at least have died with clean hands and, potentially, would have led to a change in the system. The Buddha enters the story as a *deus ex machina* to change the story of Āḷavaka—which shows another route was always open to the city guard. The community—including the 84,000—is complicit in the maintenance of the cannibal-serving state; they have karma arising from that. In a significant way, the Buddha intervened, freeing them from that complicity, as it were.<sup>90</sup>

## **2.3.2 “Let’s send an infant”**

**2.3.2.1** We might imagine that the city-guard actually thought the arrangement with the yaksha made his job easier. He could be rid of the nastier criminals without any trial or execution: the yaksha would be in their service as executioner!

But sacrificing one prisoner a day meant that they soon ran out of nasty criminals, and they had to offer the yaksha any criminal they had. “Shortly thereafter, because no new criminals were found and the old ones were gone, the prisons were empty.” [1.3.2.2]. What a mutually agreeable way of keeping the prisons—and the city—empty of criminals. We must imagine it was not a very big country in ancient India.

**2.3.2.2** The city-guard had got himself into a great irony: normally, a city (or country) free of criminals would be a good thing, but in this case, it meant that they would lose their king, too, who would be a day’s meal to the yaksha! They simply had to catch some criminals to feed the yaksha.

The king then had (some of) his own wealth scattered at the crossroads, where the public and travelers were likely to see these valuables and take them. By then, everyone in the city (and country) had known the cost of committing a crime: one became a yaksha’s day meal. This is a great lesson in the value of **life**: it is not worth losing one’s life for all the world’s or the kings’ treasures. [1.3.2.3]

**2.3.2.3** The king’s ministers (*āmacca*) then suggested they sacrificed the country’s old folks to the yaksha. An educated modern reader would almost at once accept or reason this as a kind of “social Darwinism.” Although the king had absolute power then—except over the yaksha—he was more considerate than a modern dictator. Most families would not allow their old folks to be disposed of in this manner. Even if they did not *love* their seniors, they did not *hate* them enough to be rid of them in such an inhuman manner. What would other people think of those who killed their own seniors?

<sup>89</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Ones\\_Who\\_Walk\\_Away\\_from\\_Omelas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ones_Who_Walk_Away_from_Omelas).

<sup>90</sup> Thanks, Matt Jenkins, for the seed-idea.



With the seniors spared, and so too the healthy adults vital for the country's economy and security, they are now left with the children. A minister who did not have children and felt himself to be at risk because he might not be valued, suggested infants as a way of saving their own skin, declared: "In that case, sire, let's send an infant. For they [the adults] don't feel affection for such a child as they do for their mother or father." [1.3.2.3].

One can imagine the reaction of the children who hear this story, and its negative psychological impact on them! One way of neutralizing this negative turn in this dreadful story is to see **the humour** (or cartoon villainy) behind it, and remind the children that it is just a story of ancient kings who had absolute power. The last thing we should tell the children is that they are to behave themselves on account of this episode. It's neither the spirit of the story nor is it Buddhist at all.<sup>91</sup>

**2.3.2.4** It's horribly odd that the king actually consented to this last suggestion: to offer children to the yaksha. We begin to suspect that the king did not have the kind of wisdom we would have expected of the head of the nation. The mothers and mothers-to-be fled with their children "to other countries and nurtured them there" [1.3.2.3]. In modern times, we would surely consider this to be a deleterious "brain drain" on Āḷavī that benefitted other countries.

The king did another odd thing—this time as a father—declaring, "Just as a son is dear to me, so it is for all the world. But there is no one dearer than oneself. Go, give him, too, but protect my life!" [1.3.3.1] This is a kingly thought; for another king, Pasenadi, would have agreed with him, that *there is no one dearer than oneself*.<sup>92</sup> Yet, loving mothers would disagree. **The (Karaṇīya) Metta Sutta's** only metaphor compares lovingkindness to the love of a mother who "would guard her own child—her one and only child—with her own life," we are to show lovingkindness to all beings (Sn 149 = Khp 9,6).<sup>93</sup>

### **2.3.3 Āḷavaka's household meets the Buddha**

**2.3.3.1** The Buddha decided to visit Āḷavī because he foresaw the 3 occasions for people reaching the path: (1) Āḷavaka the yaksha's streamwinning, (2) the Āḷavī prince's non-returning, and (3) 84,000 beings gaining the Dharma-eye at the conclusion of his Dharma teaching [1.3.3.2]. Anyway, the Buddha would still visit Āḷavī even if it were for just any one of these auspicious occasions.

At the time of the Buddha's visit, Āḷavaka the yaksha was away in the Himalayas attending a yaksha assembly. It is difficult not to welcome someone so charming and wise like the Buddha, not to mention one who has psychic powers. At the yaksha's huge fortress of abode [1.3.5.2], the Buddha was met by Gadrabha ("ass, donkey or mule") the door keeper. He warned the Buddha that Āḷavaka was ferocious, and that he had to inform him of the Buddha's visit. [1.3.4.2]

The Buddha had no fear of Āḷavaka for the simple reason that the Buddha would not be edible for the yaksha and that Āḷavaka had no power over the Buddha. As soon as Gadrabha was away to the Himalayas to inform his master the yaksha of the Buddha's visit, the Buddha simply did what a buddha does. He sat on "the couch of celestial gems" (*dibba, ratana, pallaṅka*). This could not be a heap of jewels, which would be very uncomfortable to sit on, but a luxurious couch studded with jewels all around.

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<sup>91</sup> But then we do have stories of abandoned children (Hansel and Gretel), children victimized by witches (the Gingerbread House) and emotional abuse (Cinderella). In fact, the Grimm fairy tales were full of child abuse before they were edited for publication. Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* ("shock-headed Peter") (1845), a German children's book of cautionary tales also fits this genre.

<sup>92</sup> **(Piya) Mallikā S** (S 3.8 = U 5.1), SD 38.7.

<sup>93</sup> Sn 1.8 = Khp 9 (SD 38.3).

**2.3.3.2** Fitting to the occasion and the literary genre (a yaksha story), the Buddha outshone the jewels and brightened the night. Naturally, this would attract the yaksha household, if they were not already standing around and gawking at the Buddha. It is not difficult to imagine how the beings there were drawn to look at someone so becoming and peaceful, the antithesis of their hard and cruel master. [1.3.4.3]

Like the Āḷavī king, the yaksha, too, had numerous women. We are not told how the women came to be Āḷavaka's harem and attendants. It might be they were attracted to Āḷavaka's violence and power; more likely, they had no choice but, on crossing his path, they had to bend to his will. Or, perhaps, they were his own kith and kin.

The Buddha at once won over the yaksha's household over by declaring why they should be kind to one another despite having a fearsome master: *Your past good karma brought you this present good fortune. Continue with the good karma. Don't show envy or violence to one another.* The crowd wildly applauded and remained in the aura of the Buddha's charisma. The Buddha's visit was a great diversion from the usual humdrum of a yaksha dwelling anyway. In modern terms, this must have the feeling and drama of a powerful election rally with a promise of better things to come!

### **2.3.4 Āḷavaka is embarrassed**

**2.3.4.1** Meantime, Gadrabha had arrived in the Himalaya yaksha conference. He at once informed his master, the yaksha, of the Buddha's visit. Apparently, Āḷavaka was determined to present a decorous front of calm and control before such an august assembly. He signalled to Gadrabha, "Be quiet! I will go and do whatever is necessary." (Unlike the Āḷavī king who had the city-guard telling him this very same thing, the yaksha had to do things himself.)

The Commentator (the narrator) then reveals a remarkable personal quality of Āḷavaka: he was what we would today call **a male chauvinist**. "His masculine conceit (*purisa,māna*) caused him to feel embarrassed, and he therefore stopped Gadrabha, telling him: 'Don't let anyone in the assembly hear this!'" [1.3.5.1].

**2.3.4.2** Āḷavaka had hardly finished his sentence (I imagine myself the movie director here), when two affable yakshas, Sātāgira and Hemavata came up, probably with a toothy (fangy) smile (yakshas had a pair of long fangs like a sabretooth tiger), telling him how fortunate he was to have the Buddha himself as a visitor! The duo had earlier stopped, rather, were stopped, en route to pay their respects to the Buddha at Āḷavaka's dwelling. They simply could not fly over the Buddha, and fell from the air, "cast down like clods of earth" (*khitta,leḍḍu*) to the ground! Clearly, one becomes well-grounded in the Buddha's presence.

Sātāgira and Hemavata's remarks were like a sharp pin that pricked Āḷavaka's hot-air balloon of conceit. Now he had to save his face as a good, or rather, evil yaksha. The Commentaries relate an amazing "attack sequence" by Āḷavaka upon the Buddha. Just like Māra, he rained **the 9 storms**—winds (*vāta*), rains (*vassa*), stones (*pāsāṇa*), weapons striking (*paharaṇa*), embers (*aṅgāra*), (burning) ashes (*kukkuḷa*), (burning) sand (*vālukā*), mud (*kalala*), and darkness (*andha,kāra*)<sup>94</sup>—upon the Buddha and sent out his horde of demons to assail the Buddha in his mansion.

When that failed to move even the hem of the Buddha's robe, he deployed his secret weapon, **the cloth weapon** (*duss'āvudha*)—of the 4 deadliest weapons in Indian mythology.<sup>95</sup> It was able to burn up vast tracts of forests, even shatter a huge mountain. We must imagine that he has destroyed his whole

<sup>94</sup> *Nava vāta,vassa,pāsāṇa,pharaṇ'aṅgāra,kukkula,vālikā,kālala,andhakāra,vuṭṭhī* ((SnA 224 f; J 1:73,25 f; BA 289,-9 f): see SD 61a (2.5.2.4).

<sup>95</sup> SD 61a (2.5.2.5).

abode to the ground, but the Buddha remained untouched. Ālavaka was unconcerned about this widespread destruction since he could easily reconstruct his divine dwelling using his powers again.

**2.3.4.3** We are unlikely to be surprised by the yaksha’s nuclear-like powers, but we certainly do not expect him to be “embarrassed” by the Buddha’s presence. Since Buddhist stories, as a rule, have lessons to teach, one reading is that powerful people, when embarrassed by failure or the perception of failure, are likely to unleash their devastating powers to destroy those who have embarrassed them. The causes of great wars, sadly, are often *petty and childish*, as yaksha stories instruct us. But the costs of the puerility of the powerful are sadly devastating from which even they cannot escape.

This was not the first and only time that Ālavaka was “**embarrassed**” (*lajjito ahoṣi*, “was ashamed”). He felt this way again, as a streamwinner, near the end of the story, when the king’s men handed over the young Ālavā prince as his meal for the day [2.2.4].

However, Ālavaka’s embarrassment this time was not out of male pride or yaksha *status*, but from his refined spiritual state as a **streamwinner**. He was now a being free from self-identify view, doubt in goodness, and attachment to rituals and vows. He was embarrassed at his bad past karma, devouring other lives to sustain his own. He was now inspired with moral shame and moral fear, which means he was naturally drawn to keep the 5 precepts, the first of which was abstaining from taking any life. [2.2.4.2]

This was the spiritual climax of Ālavaka’s life—he became a streamwinner—and we now turn to another budding drama, that is, the spiritual fate of the Ālavā prince. [2.1.3.7]

**2.3.4.4** The awakening drama behind the Ālavā prince begins with the statement that “**12 years passed**” [1.3.3.1] with the king sacrificing a person a day to the yaksha. Now, at 365 x 12, we have a total of 4380 human sacrifices made to the yaksha. We are then told, somewhat discordantly, that the king had 16,000 consorts (*devī*), which probably referred to his harem. We may well wonder if women were exempted from being sacrificed to the yaksha. Such a large number of women is often a literary device in ancient Indian stories to show that the king was very powerful. Premodern history showed us that kings, to ensure the loyalty of his subjects and security of his reign, sired children with countless women. [1.3.3.1]

**2.3.4.5** Clearly, the mention of “12 years” was to prepare **the Ālavā prince** (yet unnamed) to take centre stage. At the impending climax of this yaksha story, the Ālavā prince was 12 years old. As a side-note, we may well wonder if such a young child would be sufficient as the yaksha’s day meal. As the story happily turns out, with the Buddha’s intervention and Ālavaka’s conversion to streamwinning, the young prince was not only spared but also given an appropriate name, marking the auspicious moment of Ālavaka handing over the prince, not back to the king (he had not been a good father), but to the Buddha, who had come all the way just for this.

Having received the young prince from the yaksha, the Buddha then handed him over to the king’s men (there is no mention of the king’s presence). Since the king’s men handed the prince over to *the yaksha*, who handed him to *the Buddha*, who in turn handed him back to *the king’s men*, he was named “**Handy**” (*hatthaka*, “of the hands”), “the one who was handed over and around”; as the prince of Ālavā, he was also known as Ālavaka.

The Buddha left instructions with the king’s men that “Handy” was to be apprenticed to the sangha when he came of age, that is, usually 16 in Indian stories. When Hatthaka came of age, he lived and served the Buddha and the sangha. As he did so, he mastered all that the Buddha had taught, meditated well and became a non-returner. We have here another great disciple of the Buddha. **The story of Hatthaka** thus serves as the subplot for the Ālavaka story. [2.2.4]

### 2.3.5 Āḷavaka and the 8 questions

**2.3.5.1** After that excursus, we return to what the Āḷavaka Sutta is really about: the Buddha's answers to Āḷavaka's 8 questions [2.1]. Now we have already discussed "the significance of Āḷavaka's 8 questions" [2.1.4]. Here we will briefly examine the motif of the questions as the "**humour of irony**." Now, Kassapa, the buddha before ours, had taught **8 questions and their answers** to Āḷavaka's parents. Hence, these "buddha-domain questions" are a direct teaching from the Buddha, which Āḷavaka learned from his parents.

In the Greek sphinx story,<sup>96</sup> there is only one riddle: "What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet in midday, and three feet in the evening?" Only Oedipus is able to answer it, but in the end, he meets with tragedy by unwittingly killing his own father and marrying his mother. This is, of course, a Greek tragedy. The key difference between the two kinds of riddles is that while the sphinx knows the answer, Āḷavaka does not; it was also a set of riddles for him. All the same, both the sphinx and Āḷavaka devoured those who were unable to answer their riddles.

Although Āḷavaka knew the 8 questions, over time he forgot their answers, which were more difficult to remember anyway. This not knowing the answers to those 8 riddles must have troubled Āḷavaka, but because of his male pride [2.3.4.3], he was unwilling and unable to seek their answers from the buddha of this epoch, Gotama. It was unlikely that Āḷavaka did not know the Buddha, who was known to other leading yakshas like Sātāgira, Hemavata and others.

**2.3.5.2** Considering the liberating nature of **Āḷavaka's 8 riddles**, they may be considered an example of Buddhist humour, since it has a happy ending (unlike the sphinx's single riddle). It is a humour of irony in the sense that Āḷavaka could have easily gotten the answers from the buddha of this epoch, Gotama. He is prevented from doing so by his violent and dominating yaksha nature. Instead of seeking the right answers directly from the Buddha himself, Āḷavaka sought them from his clueless victims, all of whom became his meal on account of their ignorance. An ignorance-devouring monster!

Or those who were unable to answer the riddles were rendered insane, or they perished by being flung by their feet across the Ganges. This is very sobering considering the fatal cost of ignorance or having the wrong answers. This is in fact what religion and views do to us: we die, and keep dying, for them. The Buddha will have none of this; he knows the right time to end such violent folly. By meeting Āḷavaka and answering the riddles, he gives new life and freedom to Āḷavaka, brings non-returning to Hatthaka, and the Dharma-eye to countless beings.

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<sup>96</sup> SD 60.1e (12.6.4).

## Āḷavaka Sutta

The Āḷavaka Discourse

Sn 1.10 = S 10.12

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying at Āḷavī, in the abode of the yaksha **Āḷavaka**.<sup>97</sup>

2 Then, the yaksha Āḷavaka approached the Blessed One and said to him:

“Get out, avuso [friend]!”

“All right, friend,” the Blessed One said, and he went out.<sup>98</sup>

“Come in, recluse.”

“All right, friend,” the Blessed One said, and he went in.

3 **A second time**, the yaksha Āḷavaka approached the Blessed One and said to him:

“Get out, recluse!”

“All right, friend,” the Blessed One said, and he went out.

“Come in, recluse.”

“All right, friend,” the Blessed One said, and he went in. [S 1:214]

4 **A third time**, the yaksha Āḷavaka said to the Blessed One:

“Get out, recluse!”

“All right, friend,” the Blessed One said, and he went out.

“Come in, recluse.”

“All right, friend,” the Blessed One said, and he went in.

5 **A fourth time** the yaksha Āḷavaka said to the Blessed One:

“Get out, recluse.”

6 “I won’t [32] go out, avuso. Do whatever you must do.”

7 “I’ll ask you a question,<sup>99</sup> recluse. If you do not answer me,<sup>100</sup> I’ll drive you insane or split your heart or grab you by the feet and hurl you across the Ganges.”

8 “I do not see anyone in this world, avuso, with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its devas and humans, who could drive me insane or split my heart or grab me by the feet and hurl me across the Ganges.

But ask whatever you want, avuso.”<sup>101</sup>

The yaksha Āḷavaka then addressed the Blessed One in verse:

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<sup>97</sup> Āḷavaka means “of the forest,” from *aṭavi*, “a large forest” (see Jayawickrama 1950:36 n2). [2.1.1.1]. On yaksha, see (1.1.2.4).

<sup>98</sup> On Āḷavaka’s purpose in making the Buddha do this, and the Buddha’s reason for complying [1.4], see SD 61a (2.5.2.7).

<sup>99</sup> Comy says that the past buddha Kassapa taught these questions and their answers to Āḷavaka’s parents (who were attending on the buddha). Āḷavaka’s parents then taught them to Āḷavaka. In time, he forgot the answers, but had the questions preserved by inscribing them in vermilion on a gold sheet, which he kept in his abode (SnA 1:228; SA 1:4-10). [2.1.1.1]

<sup>100</sup> This means if the person is either unwilling to answer the questions or unable to answer them correctly.

<sup>101</sup> *Api ca tvaṃ āvuso puccha yad ākaṅkhasi*. Comy: With these words, the Buddha extended to him the “invitation of the all-knowing” (*sabbaññu, pavāraṇaṃ pavāresi*), which cannot be extended even by any pratyeka-buddha, chief disciples or great disciples. (SnA 229 f; SA 1:327). See SD 61a (2.5.2.10).

## 9 Sn 181 = S 846

*kiṃsûdha vittaṃ purisassa seṭṭhaṃ  
kiṃsu suciṇṇaṃ sukhaṃ āvahāti  
kiṃsu have sādutaraṃ<sup>102</sup> rasānaṃ  
kathaṃ jīviṃ jīvitaṃ<sup>103</sup> āhu seṭṭhaṃ ti*

- 1 What here is a person's best wealth?
- 2 What well practised brings happiness?
- 3 What is truly the sweetest of tastes?
- 4 How lives the one whose life they say is best? (1)

## 10 Sn 182 = S 847

[The Blessed One:]

*saddhîdha<sup>104</sup> vittaṃ purissasu seṭṭhaṃ  
dhammo suciṇṇo sukhaṃ āvahāti<sup>105</sup>  
saccaṃ have sādutaraṃ rasānaṃ  
paññā,jīvino jīvitaṃ<sup>106</sup> āhu seṭṭhaṃ ti*

**Faith** is here a person's best wealth;  
**the Dharma** well practised brings happiness;  
**truth** is truly the sweetest [the best] of tastes;  
**living by wisdom**, they say, one's life is best.<sup>107</sup> (2)

## 11 Sn 183 = S 848

[Āḷavaka:]

*kathaṃ su tarati oghaṃ  
kathaṃ su tarati aṇṇavaṃ  
kathaṃ su dukkhaṃ acceti  
kathaṃ su parisujjhatī ti*

- 5 How does one cross the flood?<sup>108</sup>
- 6 How does one cross the sea?
- 7 How does one overcome suffering?
- 8 How is one fully purified? [Sn 33] (3)

<sup>102</sup> Se sādutaraṃ.

<sup>103</sup> Comy says that *kathaṃ jīviṃ jīvitaṃ* is also read as *kathaṃ,jīvino jīvitaṃ*, the *jīviṃ* is metri causa (mc) by way of nasalizing *-ino* into *-m̃* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> word (*gāthā,bandha,sukh'atthaṃ pana sânunāsikaṃ vuccati*). There is also the reading: *kathaṃ,jīviṃ jīvitaṃ*, meaning is (the same): "How should the living be lived?" (*jīvantānaṃ kathaṃ,jīviṃ ti*) (SA 1:327,30-328,2). Where the dominant reading, *kathaṃ,jīvi,jīvitaṃ*, has the noun *jīvitaṃ* as the subject, this reading has *jīvitaṃ*, pres part, gen pl. See n below on *paññā,jīvino jīvitaṃ*.

<sup>104</sup> *Saddhîdha* = *saddhā idha*. Sadd 614.5 qu *saddhîdha* as the sandhi form of *idha* (CPD sv *idha*), with the sandhi *-ā* + *-i* > *-ī*. S 1:214,21 reads *saddh'idha*, but the metre confirms *īdha*.

<sup>105</sup> The *-ā*- in *āvahāti* is mc. Normally, it is *āvahati*.

<sup>106</sup> Comy suggests reading either *paññā,jīvino taṃ vā paññā,jīviṃ jīvitaṃ* (SnA 1:233,19 f) referring back to the 2 alt readings of the line, *metri causa*. Norman suggests we read *-jīviṃ* mc (Sn:N 203 n182). The tt here is *gāthā,bandha,sukhatt(h)a*, "euphony in verse composition" (SnA 1:231,4-7) or *gāthā,sukh'attha* (ThaA 1:177,24-26; PvA 33,15 f). For other cases of *gāthā,bandha,sukhattha* (*metri causa*) see Sn:N nn 69 73, 156 181 f 398; cf 537.

<sup>107</sup> The 4 qualities highlighted in this verse are (1) faith, (2) Dharma, (3) truth (truthful speech) and (4) living by wisdom [2.1.3.7].

<sup>108</sup> See [2.1.2 (5)].



### ĀḶAVAKA'S STREAMWINNING

12 Sn 184 = S 849<sup>109</sup>

[The Blessed One:]

<i>saddhāya tarati ogham</i>	By faith one crosses the flood, <sup>110</sup>	
<i>appamādena aṇṇavam</i>	by heedfulness (one crosses) the sea.	
<i>viriyena dukkham acceti</i>	By effort [energy] one overcomes suffering;	
<i>paññāva parisujjhatī ti</i>	by wisdom one is fully purified. <sup>111</sup>	(4)

13 Sn 185 = S 850

[ĀḶavaka:]

<i>katham su labhate paññam</i>	9 How does one gain wisdom? <sup>112</sup>	
<i>katham su vindate dhanam</i>	10 How does one find wealth?	
<i>katham su kittim pappoti</i>	11 How does one win fame?	
<i>katham su mittāni<sup>113</sup> ganthati<sup>114</sup></i>	12 How does one bind friends?	
<i>asmā loke param lokam</i>	13 When passing from this world to the next,	
<i>katham pecca na socatī ti</i>	how does one not sorrow?	(5)

14 Sn 186 = S 851

[The Blessed One:]

<i>saddahāno arahatam</i>	Keeping faith in the arhat's Dharma
<i>dhammaṃ nibbana, pattiyā</i>	for the attainment of nirvana,

<sup>109</sup> Miln 36,15 qu this verse ascribing it to S rather than Sn

<sup>110</sup> In this verse, the Buddha speaks of the 4 floods (*ogha*). Since **the faith faculty** is the basis for the 4 factors of streamwinning [S 55.1], the 1<sup>st</sup> line presents the streamwinner, who has crossed **the flood of views**; the 2<sup>nd</sup> line shows the once-returned, who by means of *diligence* has crossed **the flood of existence** except for one more existence in the sense-sphere world; the 3<sup>rd</sup> line shows the nonreturner who has overcome **the flood of sensuality**, a mass of suffering; and the 4<sup>th</sup> line is on the arhat path, which incl the fully purified wisdom by which one crosses over **the flood of ignorance**. See **Ogha Pañha S** (S 38.11), SD 30.3(1.4, esp 1.4.2).

<sup>111</sup> Comy: When the Blessed One says, "**By wisdom one is fully purified**," the yaksha picks up on the word "wisdom" and, through his own acumen (*paṭibhāṇa*), asks a question of both mundane and supramundane significance. At the end of the Buddha's verse, the yaksha attains streamwinning. (SnA 1:234,28-235,1)

<sup>112</sup> Comy: The Blessed One shows here 4 causes for the arising of wisdom: (1) by **faith** in the Dharma by which the arhats—buddhas, pratyeka-buddhas, and disciples—attained nirvana. Thus one gains both mundane and supramundane wisdom for the attainment of nirvana. But that does not arise merely by faith. (2) When faith arises, one approaches a teacher, lends an ear, and hears the Dharma; thus, one gains **a desire to learn** (*sussusam*). When one lends an ear and listens from a desire to learn, one gains **wisdom**. But one must also be **diligent** (*appamatto*), by way of being constantly mindful, and **astute** (*vicakkham*), able to distinguish what is well spoken or badly spoken. (3) Through **faith**, one enters upon the practice that leads to gaining wisdom. Through **a desire to learn** (*sussusāya*) one carefully listens to the means for acquiring wisdom; through **diligence** (*appamādena*) one does not forget what one has learnt; through **astuteness** (*vicakkhaṇatāya*) one expands upon what one has learnt. (4) Or else: through a desire to learn, one lends an ear and listens to the Dharma by which one gains wisdom; through diligence one bears in mind the Dharma heard; by astuteness one examines the meaning and then gradually one realizes the ultimate truth. (SnA 233; SA 1:330 f). The 4 conditions for wisdom are restated in §14.

<sup>113</sup> Skt *mitra* is historically neuter, but *mitta* is usu masc in Pali [Jayawickrama 1950:41]. [ 1.1.2.5]. In §§13 + 15, it is neut, unless we have a masc acc pl in *-āni*. For this ending, see Sn:N 166 n45.

<sup>114</sup> vl *ganhati*, but S 1:214,31 reads *ganthati*.

*sussusā*<sup>115</sup> *labhate paññam*  
*appamatto vicakkhaṇo*<sup>116</sup>

one gains wisdom from a desire to learn,  
the one who's heedful and astute [keen-eyed].<sup>117</sup> (6)

15 [PTS 14] Sn 187 = S 852

*paṭirūpa,kārī dhuravā*  
*uṭṭhātā vindate dhanam*  
*saccena kittim pappoti*  
*dadam mittāni ganthati*  
(*asmā loke param lokam*  
*katham pecca na socatī ti*)<sup>121</sup>

Doing what is proper, dutiful,<sup>118</sup>  
one with initiative<sup>119</sup> finds wealth.  
By truthfulness one wins fame;<sup>120</sup>  
by giving one binds friends. (7)  
(When passing from this world to the next,  
how does one not sorrow?) [215]

16 Sn 188 = S 853

*yass'ete caturo dhammā*  
*saddhassa ghara-m-esino*<sup>122</sup>  
*saccam dhammo*<sup>123</sup> *dhiti*<sup>124</sup> *cāgo*  
*save pecca na socati*  
(*asmā loke param lokam*  
*katham pecca na socatī ti*)

Who has these 4 qualities—  
the householder who's a faithful seeker—  
truth, Dharma, steadfastness, charity<sup>125</sup>—  
does not sorrow when he passes on. (8)  
(When passing from this world to the next,  
how does one not sorrow?)<sup>126</sup>

<sup>115</sup> In line c, Bodhi read *sussūsā* with Sn:Ee, Ce, Ee1+2. Be Se read *sussusam* as does the lemma of Comy (Be), while the corresponding lemma in Comy (Ce) has *sussusā*. From the paraphrase (see below) *sussusā* can be understood as a truncated instrumental (= *sussusāya*). In Be Se, *sussusam* seems to function as an accusative in apposition to *paññam*, perhaps as the first member of a split compound, ie, “the wisdom (consisting in) the desire to learn.”

<sup>116</sup> *Vicakkhaṇo* (*vi + cakkhaṇa*, from √CAKS, “to see”) (adj neut, lit, “sharp-eyed”), “attentive, watchful, sensible, skillful” (S 1:214 = Sn 186; Sn 583; J 4:58, 6:286; Miln 216; Vism 43).

<sup>117</sup> SnA 235 f; SA 1:331 f. See (2.1.3.3).

<sup>118</sup> Comy: **Dutiful** (*dhuravā*) means not neglecting one's responsibilities and implies mental energy. (SA 1:333). [2.2.1.2 f]

<sup>119</sup> **One with initiative** (*uṭṭhatā*) implies physical energy. Bodhi here follow Be; in Ce the last two lines come at the end of S 850; in Ee1, at the end of both S 849 and S 850; in Sn they are attached to neither verse. [2.2.1.2 f]

<sup>120</sup> SnA 236; SA 1:322 f. See (2.1.3.5).

<sup>121</sup> Sn 187 omits; but see §13.

<sup>122</sup> It is possible to interpret *-m-* as a sandhi consonant [Sn:N 193 n132], or take *gharam-esin* as an *aluk-samāsa*, ie, a tatpurusha cpd with the case ending of the 1<sup>st</sup> element retained [Sn:N 204 n188]. Cf *randhamesī* (Sn 826 & Sn:N 212 n233).

<sup>123</sup> In S 853, *saccam dhammo dhiti cāgo*; in S 854, *saccā damā cāgā khantiyī*. SA (Be) and SA (Ce) differ over the 2<sup>nd</sup> term: the former has *dammo* and *dammā*, the latter *dhammo* and *dhammā*. The explanations in SAṬ establish beyond doubt that *dhammo* and *damā* were the respective readings known to Dhammapāla. [2.2.1.3]

<sup>124</sup> The problem is to correlate the 2 tetrads mentioned in S 853 f. The difficulty arises not only on account of the replacement of *dhiti* by *khantiyā* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse but also because of the variant readings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> term. According to Bodhi, perhaps the best reading is that in Ce [and Se], which accords with Sn 187 f (Ee1): Steadfastness (*dhiti*) is spoken of under the names “dutifulness” and “initiative” [S 852ab].

<sup>125</sup> Subcomy: “Wisdom is called *dhamma* because of bearing up and examining (*dhāranato upadhāranato*) entities in accordance with actuality.” (As the verb *dhāreti* (> *dhāraṇa*) is the stock etymological explanation of *dhamma* in the Commentaries, we can infer that the author of SAṬ had a text that read *dhammo*.) (SAṬ 1:327,21 f)

<sup>126</sup> The parallel at S 1:215,2 has a couplet here not in the Sn version: *asmā lokā param lokam, evam pecca na socati*, alt tr: “That is how one sorrows not when passing from this world to the next.” It is at §§13-15 (Sn 185ef = S 850ef; Sn 187ef = S 852ef).

17 Sn 189 = S 854

*iṅgha aññe pi pucchassu  
puthu samaṇa,brāhmaṇe  
yadi saccā damā cagā  
khantiyā<sup>127</sup> bhiiyyo'dha vijjati*

Come now, ask the others, too,  
the many recluses and brahmins,  
whether there exists here anything better *d*  
than truth, self-control, charity or patience.<sup>128</sup> (9) *c*

[Ālavaka:]

18 [PTS 15 to the end] Sn 190 = S 855

*katham su dāni puccheyyam  
puthū samaṇa,brāhmaṇe  
so'ham aḷja pajānāmi  
yo attho samparāyiko<sup>129</sup>*

Why now need I ask  
the many recluses and brahmins?  
Today I have understood  
the good pertaining to future lives.<sup>130</sup> (10)

19 Sn 191 = S 856

*atthāya vata me  
buddho vāsāy'ālavim āgamā<sup>131</sup>  
so'ham<sup>132</sup> aḷja pajānāmi  
yattha dinnam maha-p,phalam*

Indeed, it was for my sake  
that the Buddha came to stay at Ālavī.  
Today I have understood  
where what is given bears great fruit. (11)

20 Sn 192 = S 857

*so aham vicarissāmi  
gāmā gāmaṃ purā puram  
namassamāno sambuddham  
dhammassa ca sudhammatan ti*

Now I will travel about  
from village to village, from city to city,  
paying homage to the awakened one  
and to the Dharma that's truly good.<sup>133</sup> (12)

[34]

— evaṃ —

240128 240704 240713 241228 250115

<sup>127</sup> It is possible that the ending of *khantiyā* [*khantiya*] is due to the omission of a svarabhakti vowel by a scribe who knew Sanskrit. The same reading occurs at S 1:215,7\*. (Sn:N 204 n189)

<sup>128</sup> On *damo* (and *dhammo*), see (2.2.1.3).

<sup>129</sup> Although Comy explains *attho* in line d as the visible benefit (*diṭṭha,dhammika*) and future-life (*samparāyika*) benefit (SnA 237 f; SA 1:334 f), there seems to be no compelling reason not to take the two words at their face value as adjective and noun bearing a single significance, namely, the good pertaining to the future life.

<sup>130</sup> See (2.2.3.1).

<sup>131</sup> SnA 238. [2.2.3.2]

<sup>132</sup> Ce Sn:Ee *so'ham*; Be Ee Se *yo'ham*.

<sup>133</sup> SnA 239 f; SA 1:336 f. [2.2.3.2]